

Privet Drive was a peaceful Muggle street, and quite plain in that every house was an exact duplicate of the one next to it. Each was a two-story on a small plot of dirt, complete with immaculately trimmed lawns, and big shiny cars in the driveway. The people who lived on that street were all very well-to-do and serious about their reputations, but none more so than the Dursley family at Number Four.

Vernon and Petunia strived to be the perfect example of a proper British family. Vernon worked as an executive at Grunnings' Drills, and Petunia was the homely wife who cooked, cleaned, and had weekly tea parties with the other ladies on the street. They had one son, Dudley, who ruled the local kids with his gang, and terrorized both small children and animals on a daily basis. Of course, to his family, he was their sweet little boy who was just oh so popular and polite.

There was only one thing that could ruin the perfect image the Dursley family worked so hard to keep, and that thing was their niece, Hallie Potter. She was neither neat, polite, or even ordinary. At least, not by her relatives' standards. She was everything they detested, and she was currently doing the one thing that could upset them the most. Hallie was doing her homework. Now, one wouldn't expected that to be such a big deal, but when her essay was on the properties of the Mandrake root, a magical plant, then it crossed the line.

Hallie was not what you would call normal by any definition. She was a part of two worlds, but her place in each was profoundly different. In magical terms, Hallie was a hero, the savior of all wizards, and not even twelve to boot. In muggle terms, Hallie was lower than dirt, a thing to be feared, and most certainly burned at the stake- if they still did that sort of thing.

Not that anyone had ever bothered to ask Hallie's opinion about all this. To her, fame was indeed highly overrated, and more trouble than it was worth. It only gave her more enemies than any child needed, and made people stare at her like she was something to be put on display. She could just picture that gilded birdcage with a sign saying 'Don't feed the hero, she bites.'

During her summers, Hallie was not the 'Boy' Who Lived, a wizard/witch, or even a human being. She was that beastly child the Dursley family took in, purely out of the goodness of their hearts. That wretched little girl who was nothing but trouble, and certain to end up in a prison cell one day. More formally, she was known as 'Girl,' 'Potter,' and her personal favorite, 'Freak.' Of course, as it was her own family using these terms, Hallie didn't much care what they thought. After all, why would anyone take their opinion seriously? They were like the epitome of all things muggle and *normal* to the point where they seemed anything but. If that didn't just scream 'issues' then Hallie didn't know what did.

Unfortunately, as it was summer, Hallie was once again stuck in their so-called care. Her first year at Hogwarts had ended less than two weeks ago. Those several months at the castle had been precious to her, though. Her entire life had changed in what seemed the blink of an eye. This time a year ago, Hallie would have been slaving away for her aunt and uncle, getting beat up by her cousin's friends, and looking forward to starting at Stonewall High with the same stuck up children who had taunted her all her life.

Instead, she had been whisked away to the magical world, where she had learned of her heritage as a witch, and the truth about her parents' deaths. They hadn't died in a car crash, drunk, as Hallie had been led to believe by her mother's bitter sister. They had been murdered, and Hallie had been the one to defeat their killer; not that he was gone for good.

Lord Voldemort had shown himself just weeks ago in an attempt to regain his powers and kill Hallie once and for all. She had stopped him, though, with the help of her two best friends. But Hallie now knew that he was out there, biding his time. He may have been a ghostly shell of his former self, but it was still damn scary to come face to face with the Dark Lord living off the back of her professor's head.

Other than that close call, Hallie had experienced a rather enjoyable year. She's gotten into Gryffindor House, the same as her parents, and even won a place on the Quidditch team. She'd made several new friends, but most importantly, she'd met Ron Weasley and

Hermione Granger. They were complete opposites in every way, and couldn't help but bicker with each other constantly, but when it came to Hallie, they were there no matter what. She couldn't have asked for better friends, especially ones who would leap into danger without a moment's hesitation, and who accepted her for what she was. Yes, that had been the true test, revealing her secret.

The entire year, Hallie had been forced to portray a boy, Harry, for her own safety, and most likely, the wizarding community's peace of mind. She'd lied to both of her friends, allowing them to believe it as well, and Hallie had quailed at the mere thought of finally telling them she was a girl. It turned out that she needn't have worried. When Ron and Hermione had seen the real her, it hadn't mattered. To them, she was still the same person on the inside, just a little- er, different, on the outside.

Hallie hadn't received word from either of her friends yet, but she wasn't worried. Ron had promised to invite her for the summer, and she knew he wouldn't let her down. Anyway, Hallie remembered that owl of his, Errol. The poor thing looked like it could keel over and die any day now, so she wouldn't be surprised if he turned up late, or not at all. Hermione, on the other hand, was in France for the majority of the summer, and didn't even have her own owl. Hallie had considered sending Hedwig to her, but she didn't want to tire her out. Besides, it was a miracle the Dursleys were even letting the bird out. Petunia would throw a fit if Hallie sent Hedwig out more than was necessary. She was already in hysterics over the number of dead rats that both Hedwig and Sable were leaving around the house.

Speaking of her relatives, they were being about as pleasant as could be expected, but things had definitely improved. For one thing, Hallie was no longer confined to the cramped cupboard under the stairs. Her bedroom of ten years had gone back to storing cleaning supplies, not that it was ever proper for holding small children. Instead, Hallie had been moved into Dudley's second bedroom, where he kept the multitude of toys he'd broken or gotten bored with. There were also a few pieces of worn out furniture that her uncle had found, including a lopsided desk that Hallie had propped up with an old baby block, a dusty wardrobe that refused to shut, and a low bed with a lumpy

mattress. It was still a big step up for Hallie... which was kind of pathetic if she bothered to think about it.

Hallie was lucky to have even gotten the room, though. Dudley had totally flipped when he saw her moving her stuff in. He didn't even want the room, but it was more the principle of the thing. Hallie was sure that even the people the next street over had heard his fake tantrum. She had even heard one of Dudley's gang asking who made 'those wussy shrieks.' Dudley, of course, blamed it on Hallie. He claimed she saw a spider. As someone who had grown up checking her clothes for spiders every morning, Hallie thought it a poor excuse.

Anyway, Hallie had been moved upstairs her first night back on Privet Drive, and was even allowed to keep her school trunk in the room. Although, she hadn't really given her uncle a choice in the matter.

The second they got home, he had tried to punish her, physically pulling her from the back seat of the car, and dragging her inside. He'd only begun to threaten her for her indiscretions the previous summer (i.e. the zoo incident), when Hallie made a little threatening of her own. Pulling out her wand once more, she made some offhand comments about learning some truly fantastic things at school, such as turning people into cockroaches. That was an outright lie, since McGonagall didn't teach human transfiguration until sixth year, but her uncle didn't need to know that. He had gaped at her furiously for a moment, before he hissed in a strained tone that she really was getting a bit big for her cupboard.

So here Hallie was, for once actually enjoying her summer vacation. It wasn't fun in the least, still being confined to the parameters of Privet Drive, but at least it was relaxing. She hadn't been forced to do all the household chores this year, only the occasional cleaning, and her relatives were ignoring her for the most part. Normally, she would be expected to wake up early every morning, make breakfast, clean the house, tidy the garage, wash the car, repaint the fence, prune the garden, make lunch, fix up the house again, wash the windows, wash the dishes, do the laundry, dust the living room, mow the lawn, make dinner, take out the trash... and various other things that were mostly just to keep her out of the way. Was it really necessary to wash a car and mow the lawn every day?

Hallie was kept busy at all hours of the day so she wouldn't 'get into any mischief,' and the few minutes she did have free were spent 'Hallie Hunting.' That was a game where Dudley and his friends gave her a five-minute head start before chasing Hallie down and giving her a good wallop, just to remind her of her place. Hallie had learned at an early age that fighting back did no good against five boys who were much bigger than her and had no qualms about hitting a girl. Since then, she'd learned to run for one of her hiding places and stay there until they got bored and gave up.

She had yet to encounter any of Dudley's friends this summer, and she hoped it stayed that way. Unless she wanted to break the Muggle Secrecy Act, and get expelled from Hogwarts for underage magic, Hallie couldn't couldn't exactly use her wand to stave them off. They would probably think it was just a joke, anyway, and snap it just for the heck of it. Now, that would be a disaster. She was actually surprised Dudley hadn't thought of that yet. All he had to do was sit on Hallie's wand, and he could torment her all summer without fear of being turned into a pig, which was Hallie's secret ambition for when she turned of age.

'Okay, enough fantasizing, Hallie, you're almost finished,' she berated herself as she skimmed the page in her textbook on Mandrakes. She was almost finished with her Herbology essay. That would leave just Transfiguration, History of Magic, and Potions, since she'd finished Charms the previous day. There was no Defense homework for obvious reasons.

Hallie had decided to get an early start on her summer homework, something that would have sent her friend, Ron, into convulsions. He would think her crazy for doing homework, but all Hallie could say was that Hermione had been a bad influence on her. She was also rather bored at the moment, and if reading through her textbooks was the only method of relieving that boredom, then so be it.

"The cry of the Mandrake is fatal to all who hear it..."

'Wow, death by screaming plant. That would really suck,' Hallie thought as she finished off the last inch of parchment.

"Ha! Done!" Hallie signed her name at the top with a flourish, and capped off her ink bottle, before stowing everything away in the loose floorboard under her bed. She had discovered it by accident when she stubbed her toe on the rough wood one morning, and decided it made an excellent hiding spot. There was no way she was leaving her homework laying around for Dudley to find and tear up. She'd also placed her wand, her father's invisibility cloak, and the necklace from Dumbledore under there. Better safe than sorry. After looking through the photo album from Hagrid, Hallie had hidden it there as well. She could only imagine Petunia's reaction if she were to see the pictures of her mother and father. That woman's jealousy knew no bounds.

'Of course, it must be hard to look like horse when your sister is so beautiful,' Hallie thought, not really sympathetic of her horrid aunt.

She had never really seen a picture of her parents before, except for a glimpse of one that her aunt had burned only moment after she found it. Hallie now knew that she looked a great deal like her mother. It was kind of amusing that she was almost identical to her father, James, while under the glamour, but by herself, Hallie had her mother's small frame, facial features, and bright green eyes. The only thing she really had of her father was the messy black hair. She loved having something of both parents, really, but couldn't it have been anything else other than the hair? Hallie was still growing her shoulder-length locks out in the hope that they would be tamed by the extra weight. At the rate she was going, she feared it would be down to her waist before it got any flatter.

As she tucked the drying parchment under her bed, Hallie pulled the thin album out, running a hand over the cover fondly. She knew she would never be able to thank Hagrid enough for the gift. She flipped it open as she sat back on her bed, pausing as the mattress creaked loudly. The Dursleys had all gone to bed, and Hallie didn't want to hear their complaints the next morning if she woke any of them up.

She turned the first page of the album, searching out the pictures that were fast becoming her favorites. There was one of what must have been her birth, with both Lily and James sitting on a hospital bed and cooing at the tiny bundle between them. The best part about wizard

photos was that they moved, and every now and then, Hallie could see the bundle shift and a small limb poke out, which one of her parents would try to tickle.

James leaned over to make faces at the baby, when suddenly, a chubby hand reached out and snatched his glasses off. Lily began laughing at the flabbergasted look on her husband's face, before gently pulling the wire frames out of the drooly grasp. Hallie fought back a laugh as James charmed his glasses dry.

Another photo Hallie loved to look at was of her parents' wedding. There they were, looking so unbelievably happy. They were both very young but obviously in love with each other. Her mother was wearing white silk robes similar to a wedding dress, and her father wore black formal robes. They both chose that moment to kiss each other passionately, making Hallie scrunch up her nose and blush.

A man behind James snickered and waved at Hallie. He had long, dark hair and bright blue eyes. Next to him was another man who wore a slightly tired, but cheerful expression. He looked vaguely familiar, but Hallie couldn't remember where she had seen him before... Lastly, there was another man, this one short and plump. He reminded Hallie a bit of Neville Longbottom, but with none of his shyness. This man also twitched a lot as his watery eyes flickered back and forth between the lip-locked couple and the other wedding guests. He would grin a little, showing large front teeth, before checking over his shoulder in a paranoid fashion.

Hallie turned her attention back to the second man, the one with short, sandy hair and amber eyes. Where did she know him from? He was obviously a friend of her parents, but if that were true, then where was he now? Why hadn't he ever contacted her? His face teased the edges of her memory. Hallie was almost positive she knew him...

Dudley Dursley was experiencing a very pleasant dream that night. He rolled over on his queen-size bed, a sappy smile on his face. In his mind, all was at last right in the world. In other words, Dudley was the supreme ruler of the world, and everyone bowed down to his awesome power.

He sat upon a gilded throne in his own castle, his massive bulk seeping over the sides of it. Dudley was garbed in magnificent golden robes, with a thick crown perched precariously on his round head. The throne room was cluttered with large, expensive toys, teetering piles of sweets, and his personal circus performers who danced around the clock. Servants attended to his every whim with a mere wave of his hand.

"WHERE IS MY CAKE!" Dudley's voice boomed, as he banged a fist against the arm of his throne impatiently.

A heavy-set man with a walrus mustache came toddling down the red carpet. His sweating face was beat red by the time he reached his son. "Forgive me, your highness! There was slight delay in the kitchen, but your mother is coming any second now with your cake!"

Dudley sneered at his sniveling father. The man was saved from his wrath by the double doors banging open. A thin, horsey woman came in, a harness attached to her back as she dragged a dessert cart by two thick cables. An enormous six-layer cake towered on the cart, covered in strawberries and chocolate icing. She stumbled forward, groaning under the weight.

"Here... you are... Diddly-poo..." Petunia gasped.

Her son turned his nose up at the cake, "Pathetic. The last one was at least twelve layers!"

"I am so sorry, Dudders! I'm not worthy to be your mother!" she wailed, dropping to all fours. "Lock me in the dungeons, I don't care! I deserve to die for making you unhappy!"

"Guards, take her away!" Dudley ordered, and Malcolm and Piers stalked forward. Piers grinned evilly as he picked up the sobbing woman, and Malcolm patted the large bat secured to his belt.

"I grow bored with this," Dudley drawled. "Bring out the entertainment!"

There was a loud poof of purple smoke, and a giant top hat appeared in the center of the room. With a snap of his fingers, the show began.

Dudley's favorite magician from the telly, The Great Humberto, appeared in a flash of light. His cape swished around him as he pulled out a thick black wand and smiled charmingly at the audience.

"For my first trick, your highness, I will pull a rabbit out of this hat!" He rapped his wand against the giant hat, and said, "*Abra Kedabra!*"

Then Humberto reached in, his arm vanishing completely, and came back back up with a set of black rabbit ears clutched in his hand. Attached to those ears was Dudley's freak of a cousin, looking horribly frightened and squealing to get free of the man. Hallie struggled some more as Humberto's beautiful assistant wheeled out a long box.

"For my next trick, I will cut her in half!"

Dudley clapped and cheered while his cousin pleaded for mercy.

"Dudley, don't do this! I'm sorry I threatened you! I didn't mean it! Please no-"

Humberto's assistance shut her in the box, with only her feet and bunny-eared head sticking out. Grinning, the magician pulled out a wicked-looking saw. The blade glinted as he brought it towards the box and-

A loud crash woke Dudley from the the best part of his dream. Grunting in annoyance, he blinked in the dark room and struggled to sit up. He finally got his bulk leaning against the headboard, and glanced around his room for the source of the noise.

Everything looked all right. Dudley's big screen TV was still tuned in to his late-night cartoons. The computer sitting on his desk was turned off. The pile of dirty clothes for his mum to do were still in the corner. The floor was still covered in Mars Bar wrappers, crumple paper plates, and broken glass- wait... Broken glass?

The small white lamp that usually stood on Dudley's bedside table was knocked over, the top gone, and the light bulb shattered on the rug. Dudley shrugged. He must have knocked it over in his sleep or

something. Oh, well, he'd get someone to clean it up in the morning. He yawned widely, and turned over to go back to sleep. Maybe he could finish that dream?

Dudley snuggled deeper into his Star Wars bed sheets. Just as he was closing his beady blue eyes, he saw something, a shadow, sitting on his bed. Dudley's eyes snapped open, and he tried to make out the thing positioned not two feet from his face. Whatever it was had a dark color impossible to see in his room. Then it blinked.

Two slanted eyes the same color as Dudley's peered at him. He could do nothing but stare at the strange animal in surprise until, suddenly, the clear blue eyes swirled, darkening to blood red, and the pupils narrowed to demonic points. The creature stretched open its mouth lazily, revealing a set of tiny silver fangs...

Dudley screamed bloody murder and jumped back in horror, toppling off the side of his bed. He hit the floor with enough force to shake the entire house as he continued to shriek, only stopping for breath, then starting again.

Dudley's voice woke the the residents of Number Four easily, including the ones next door. Lights were turned on in bedrooms, and people opened their windows, yelling for quiet. Two doors down, the neighbors' dog started up, barking in response to Dudley's own howls, followed by the other animals on the street, from Number Two's Great Dane to Number Eight's Chihuahua. Even old Mrs. Figg's cats became irritated on Wisteria Walk as they heard the noise. The strangely intelligent creatures were meowing for their owner to come look.

Back in her bedroom, Hallie had been on the verge of a mental breakthrough when the piercing sound of Dudley's scream broke through her reverie, startling her so much that she automatically reached for her wand in defense. Hallie heard the ruckus outside, including a car alarm or two that were set off.

Warily, she tiptoed to her bedroom door, prepared for anything she might find. It was likely that Dudley just had a nightmare, but Hallie wasn't taking any chances. Creeping into the hall, she pushed down

her natural desire to light her wand tip to see better in the dark. As she reached her cousin's room, the door creaked open.

Hallie held her wand out and took a step forward... only to see her own cat slip out. She raised an eyebrow at Sable's appearance. The sleek black feline stared back innocently with her own emerald eyes, and gave a light meow. Hallie snorted.

Just then, Vernon and Petunia burst out of their bedroom. Her aunt was crouched fearfully behind her husband, shaking in her tacky pink robe, while Vernon held a golf club in his hands. Dudley stumbled out into the hall at the moment, pale-faced and trembling. He gasped at the sight of Hallie's cat and tripped backwards onto the floor.

"Mummy," he yelled, pointing at Sable, "it's a m-monster!"

Hallie looked back at her cowering family and said in dry tone, "It's a cat."

"IT TRIED TO KILL ME!" Dudley flinched as Sable meowed again.

Vernon glared furiously at Hallie and started yelling, while Petunia seemed fearful for her son's sanity. It was just a cat, after all, albeit a freaky-looking one. Hallie could only shake her head in disgust as her uncle continued to shout in her face.

"Ron better get me out of here soon," Hallie mumbled under her breath. "These people are nutters!"

"*Me-ow*," Sable said agreeably.

At the very hour that insanity was running rampant in the Dursley household, a rather decrepit and bedraggled-looking owl was slowly making its way toward number four Privet Drive. He bore a letter addressed in a hasty scrawl to one Harry Potter. His target's magical signature shown like a beacon in the dark night, and it was the only thing that kept the sorry bird moving with each tired beat of its wings.

Anyone other than a Weasley might have been concerned about the way his breathing labored in the occasional hoarse hoot. However, they were perfectly used to things that were old and/or damaged, so they could tell that Errol was still good for a few more years yet.

The weary owl nearly collapsed in relief when he closed in on the house. This had to have been the third time in a single week that the Weasleys had sent out mail to this particular recipient, and Errol could only hope he managed to deliver it this once. He was a proud creature, if a little old, and his family already doubted his mail carrying prowess. And yet, these last few misses had been through no fault of his own.

No, IT was stopping him each and every time. But Errol was ready for IT now. He was going to keep both of his bulging orange eyes on the lookout, despite his bad vision. He would not fail again. No, not again-

A startled squawk went unheard by the residents of Privet Drive, so preoccupied were they with the shouting done by those normally polite folks at number four. On any other night, though, it still might have been dismissed as an unfortunate bird. They all knew that batty old Arabella Figg let her mangy cats do as they please, wandering the local neighborhood and terrorizing the natural, *normal* wildlife.

And yet, no one would have ever guessed that something even more unnatural than those flea-bitten felines was prowling the streets. At that moment, IT was perched on the roof of number five, crouched down to avoid notice, and only its pointed ears swiveled to and fro in speculation. A long-fingered hand clutched the latest missive to Harry Potter tightly, and IT shoved the envelope down a dingy pillowcase tied around its torso, where it joined the already noticeable bulge of stolen letters.

Poor Errol turned his tail feathers toward home, regretfully emptyhanded, but much lighter without the heavy letter. IT had foiled him once again. *'Oh, well.'* Errol gave a sighing hoot. Maybe next time.

Hallie groaned as she finally managed to pull a rather stubborn dandelion out of her aunt's garden. Sighing tiredly, she sat back on her heels and tightened the rubber band holding back her hair. The sun was high overhead, and she could already feel the beginnings of sunburn on her face and arms. She was tired, thirsty, and dying to take a cold shower.

It was the morning after Dudley's scare, and Hallie was suffering the consequences today. Her uncle had ordered Hallie to keep Sable locked in her room at all times. She knew he would have preferred just tossing the cat outside, but with its abnormal appearance, that was just not an option. Hallie had agreed reluctantly, just glad that Sable could still climb out onto the tree outside her window, so she didn't have to worry about the mess he might leave in her room.

As for her own punishment, Hallie was told to weed both the front and back gardens, and she was not allowed to come in until she finished. Now, Hallie could have easily protested. It was far too hot outside, and this constituted as slave labor in her book, but she didn't say anything. Hallie wasn't sure how long her relatives' fear of magic would hold out, and she didn't want to push her luck.

Grabbing a fistful of torn weeds, Hallie stuffed them into a giant plastic bag. A small green snake slithered through the upturned dirt by her leg, startling her for a moment, but Hallie let it be. Her aunt had said to get rid of the weeds, snakes were most certainly not in the job description.

Hallie stood up, dusting off her jeans, and stretched painfully. She'd already finished the flowerbed next to the driveway and the one under the kitchen window in the back. Now there was just the one around the birdbath to do, and then she could retreat into the air-conditioned house.

Crunching footsteps on the decorative gravel behind her warned Hallie of what was sure to be some unpleasant company.

"Having fun, Potter?"

Forcing back a groan at the familiar voice, Hallie turned around. The kitchen door bounced against the side of the house as a rather reluctant Dudley waddled outside, following his best friend, Piers Polkiss, who had an eager glint in his eye as he approached Hallie.

Piers was perhaps the worst of Dudley's friends, and Hallie had little tolerance for him. She had known him since they were both very small, Piers having been her cousin's first cohort. Ever since kindergarten (when Dudley had discovered the joys of making his classmates cry) Piers had always been there to lend a helping hand. He was a short, sallow-skinned boy with muddy brown hair, narrow black eyes, and a sharply angled nose. Hallie had always felt a distinctly rodent-like quality about him, which for some reason, made her distaste of him double.

All her life, Piers had tormented her, side by side, with Dudley. Whereas Dudley sometimes had trouble catching Hallie once she ran for it, Piers was the swift one who could always tackle her to the ground for him. He was quick, and probably the cleverest of Dudley's little gang, with his sharp tongue and penchant for lying. Hallie knew without a doubt that if he'd ever, Merlin forbid, been a wizard, Piers would have made Slytherin House hands down. Dudley could have, too, for that matter. He did remind her a bit of Goyle- big and stupid. Or maybe she was giving him too much credit?

"Mate, why don't we go back inside?" Dudley tried in what he thought was a jaunty tone. "You know I've got that new computer game, *Alien Blaster 2* in my room. Just got it yesterday and-"

"What's the matter with you, Dud?" Piers asked in a sneering voice. "You're always coming up with some excuse these days not to mess with Potter!"

"Uh, well, I just don't want to! Who cares about her when I have better things I could be doing?" Dudley seemed unsure of what to say in his own defense. Hallie tried to hold back a smirk as she watched her cousin flounder.

Piers noticed her expression, however, and asked the squirming blonde, "Don't tell me you're afraid of a girl now?"

"NO WAY!" Dudley protested quickly.

"Then prove it," Piers said. Deciding to show Dudley how it was done, he ripped the bag out of Hallie's stunned grasp, and laughed as he dumped the mess of plant matter on top of Petunia's flowers.

Hallie glowered. "That took me three hours, you bloody bastard!"

"Oops, how clumsy of me," Piers grinned unapologetically.

"Sod off, Polkiss," she said between gritted teeth, her fists twitching in her garden gloves to just go ahead and strangle him.

"Make me, Potter."

Now, more than ever, she wished she could do just that, but Hallie knew there was no way for her to get rid of him without using magic. She bit her lip and glared down at her worn out sneakers in silence. Piers let out a bark of laughter when he saw her lack of response. Stepping forward, he gave her a hard shove. Hallie stumbled, but didn't back down.

"C'mon, Potter!" he jeered. "Fight back already! Don't start something if you're not going to finish it!"

Dudley watched from the side as Hallie allowed another to push her around. Why hadn't Piers been turned into a toad or something yet? Where was her little magic stick now?

Hallie bit back a cry as she was knocked backwards again, this time tripping over a rock and hitting the grass hard. She wondered if she could still make a quick escape and hide out in the local park.

'Just like old times,' Hallie thought bitterly.

As she glanced up at the two boys through her bangs, she recognized a look of calculation showing on her cousin's face. That

didn't bode well at all. If she didn't do something soon, he was sure to run to his parents later and say that Hallie had been faking all along.

'This is so not good...'

"You're pathetic, Potter. You still can't stand up for yourself!" Piers spat, glaring at her with disgust.

Hallie met his stare, not phased in the least after an entire year with Snape. They sounded a lot alike. Always picking on Hallie, calling her worthless and weak... What did they know anyway? Nothing, that's what!

Dudley came forward then, snickering at his helpless cousin. He was already cracking his knuckles in preparation as Hallie pushed herself off the ground.

'BUGGER THE MINISTRY OF MAGIC!' Hallie silently raged. At this point, she was too furious to listen to that voice of reason that said, *'Do you want to be expelled?!'* Instead, she told herself in what she hoped was a believable tone, *'They only look for magic done with a wand, right? So, I won't use my wand. I'll use my amazing psychic powers to blow him up!'*

Hallie purposely ignored her inner Hermione who pointed out how completely ridiculous that was. She didn't have any psychic ability, as she well knew.

'Come on...' Hallie squinted at Piers's pinched face, barely noticing as Dudley came around her back to effectively surround her. *'EXPLODE ALREADY!'* she screamed, picturing his tiny head just bursting like a balloon.

While Hallie was giving herself a migraine, Dudley pulled her arms around her back to keep her from getting away. He was positively giggling with glee at the thought of returning to his favorite pastime. Piers had been right. Boy, had he missed tormenting his cousin!

Piers advanced on Hallie, who was beginning to struggle as panic set in. Nothing was going to save her now, not her magic, and most certainly not her relatives. She watched, as though in slow motion, as

the boy in front of her pulled back his fist. This was going to hurt... Hallie forced her eyes shut at the last minute, just waiting for the inevitable...

But it never came.

In fact, what stopped her cousin's bullying friend was a situation perhaps even more unbelievable than Hallie's nonexistent mind powers. It was a tiny green snake who came to her rescue. The very same one she had seen in the garden.

"AAAAHHHHH!" Piers shrieked, hopping around on one leg and shaking the other madly in an attempt to dislodge the snake slithering up his pants leg. Dudley remained in shock for only a moment before he dropped Hallie as though she was something contaminated. He didn't even bother to rescue Piers, instead choosing to run back inside with his hands clinging protectively to his bottom.

'What the hell was that about?' Hallie wondered.

Piers squealed as the snake finally dropped to the ground and took off after Dudley, leaving Hallie without a backward glance. Hallie herself could only stare for some time in the direction that the two boys had left, wondering just what had happened. Shrugging it off as unimportant, she turned back to her aunt's garden, and resumed the arduous task of picking out all the weeds burying her aunt's prized *petunias*.

'Now how narcissistic is that?' Hallie thought with disgust towards the garish pink flowers.

The little green snake slithered back into the garden as Hallie retrieved her bag. Smiling at the little reptile, she whispered a relieved thanks.

"It wass my pleassure..."

Hallie froze and did a double-take. The snake was gone, and Hallie was hearing voices. Shaking her head, Hallie muttered something about heatstroke and went back to work.

As the daylight waned and the air temperature finally cooled down, Hallie worked on, even after her uncle's car pulled into the driveway, and he heaved his large bulk inside. He had completely ignored his toiling niece, except to give her a harsh word to finish up quickly if she expected any supper. She doubled her efforts in response, not for his sake, but for her own growling stomach.

Sable had stopped by as the sun finally set, having obviously climbed down the large oak outside her window. He mewed at Hallie reproachfully, as though it was somehow her fault that neither of them had eaten yet. Hallie wasn't very sympathetic to his grumbling tummy; it was after all his actions that had put her here, regardless of how much enjoyment she had gotten out of Dudley's shrieking.

At last, after piling the heavy trash bags near the sidewalk to be picked up, Hallie was free to go inside. Sable trotted after her eagerly, keeping to the shadows so his dark coat wouldn't be seen by any of the Dursleys. Yawning, Hallie simply grabbed an apple and a leftover dinner roll from the table, as well as some scraps of chicken for the cat, before trudging upstairs. All the while, she mentally counted off another day until her return to Hogwarts. Now, how many did that leave?

'Too many,' her fuzzy mind replied.

Long after Hallie had fallen asleep that night, a shadowy figure moved from its hiding spot in the bushes where it had been watching the oblivious girl at intervals throughout the day. It was now eager to get back to the house before its presence, however ignored, was missed. Before disappearing, it took one last glance at the second floor window.

The house elf shook his head in bemusement, large ears flopping against his face as he did so. Even weeks after his first visit to the Muggle neighborhood, there were still many things he could not understand. Like most creatures bound to the service of wizards, he could sense magical signatures clearly. As it was, his internal radar had led him right to the small girl at this house, and that could only mean one thing...

Mr. Harry Potter sir was a girl!

The other elves would never believe him.

As the weeks passed, Hallie grew increasingly desperate for any human contact (the Dursleys obviously didn't count). She had taken to staying awake into the early hours of the morning, just sitting at the tiny window of Dudley's second bedroom, as though ready to wave down any owl that might be looking for her. At that point, she would have gladly accepted any correspondence from her only friends, even if it was a short and abrupt letter stating that they never wanted to see her again. Anything would be better than this horrible waiting, not knowing what they thought... Yeah, right. That was what her despondent mind had tried to make her believe, but Hallie was sure that the loss of either Ron or Hermione would destroy her utterly.

Hallie sometimes wondered if she was being ridiculous. Ron and Hermione had proven themselves beyond loyal, and she didn't see them as the type to just forget about her. However, Hallie had never had the highest self-esteem growing up with the Dursleys, so it was hard to compare what she should know with what she already believed; that no one would ever want to be friends with a freak like her.

Still, she couldn't really blame them if they did stop being her friends. Who would want to after what Hallie had put those two through? There were so many times the previous year that she had gone looking for trouble, dragging them with her, and it had found all three of them. They could have lost their lives last month, all because Hallie had thought it her duty as the Boy-Who-Lived to stop Voldemort. Even if it was, that had given her no right to bring Ron and Hermione down the trapdoor with her.

Even as Hallie reasoned that neither would have stayed behind no matter what she said, she knew that a small part of her was eternally grateful that they hadn't. She'd have probably been dead if not for Hermione's smarts and Ron's strategy. What could she, Hallie, have ever accomplished on her own? She was just one scrawny little first year, raised up on a pedestal for something she barely remembered.

If it had been just her down there, Hallie probably wouldn't have survived past the Devil's Snare, and even if she had, the chessboard would have surely done her in. She was, after all, rubbish at that game.

But perhaps the most serious reason for Ron and Hermione to ever consider breaking their friendship would be the way she had lied to them. Sure they had said it was no problem, but now that they'd had an entire month to think on it...? They would probably be perfectly content to never see her face, glamore or not, ever again.

Hallie felt like crying at the thought, but it was the only thing that made sense. Why else would she have received not a single word from anyone that summer? Not even Hagrid had written, although she supposed he had no reason to. He had probably only helped her out as some sort of penance to her dead parents.

Even as exhausted as she was from lack of sleep, Hallie stayed awake a few more hours, still grasping at the hope that it was all just some mistake, and that soon the owls would come pouring in... But of course, she didn't really believe that. Hallie fell asleep still poised on a chair at the window, her head resting on her folded arms. Hedwig and Sable exchanged a look from behind the sleeping girl, conveying their worry for the young witch in a way that their own speech could not. Each stayed up that night, dutifully continuing Hallie's watch.

Not a single owl turned up.

Hallie awoke to a decidedly unpleasant sight the next morning. One was the blinding sun coming up over the horizon, and directly into her bleary eyes. The other was the depressingly empty windowsill; as usual it was bereft of any mail.

Blinking in an attempt to rid herself of the colorful spots in her vision, Hallie stood up and stretched, wincing as her neck cracked. That was the last time she fell asleep in a chair to wait for letters from her so-called friends...

Next time she would wait in the bed.

Turning to the cracked mirror in her room, Hallie tried to ignore the pitying gazes of her two familiars. Could animals even show pity? Hedwig gave a sad hoot before tucking her head under a wing in order to escape the plaguing light. Sable pawed at her leg, and then turned meaningfully toward the door. Scratch that, he was just hungry again.

As she stared at her reflection, Hallie tried to straighten out her rumpled clothes and finger-combed her hair, knowing a brush would be useless anyway. As she searched through a pile of castoff shirts, wondering if she owned anything that didn't come below her knees, Hallie thought about the upcoming day. What exactly was she going to do today, other than avoid her relatives? Her homework was practically finished- a truly sorry thing in Hallie's opinion as it wasn't even August yet- except for that essay for Snape, but she was hoping to get help on that from Herm-

"Don't think about that," Hallie ordered herself sternly.

Anyway, no homework, and her chores were practically nonexistent now...

'Never thought I'd miss cleaning, but at least it kept me busy...'

...So, what was left for her to do?

'I can't believe I need some type of work to keep my mind off things. Do I really have nothing better to do? Dudley has a bigger social life than I do!' Hallie thought in annoyance.

"DIDDLY-POO, BREAKFAST IS READY!" Aunt Petunia shrieked in her sickeningly sweet voice. Footsteps that shook the entire second floor were heard a moment later as Dudley moved down to the kitchen.

"GIRL, GET DOWN HERE!"

Ah, and that was Petunia's other the voice. It was the one she used when talking to persistent salesman, messy animals, and Hallie- in that order. It was nice to know just where she rated with her mother's sister...

Sighing and giving up her search for a better shirt, Hallie left her room, shutting the bedroom door with a snap before Sable could slip out. She heard his indignant meows and what sounding like an amused coo from Hedwig as she left.

Her uncle and Dudley were already seated at the table when she entered the kitchen, with Petunia running continuously between her son's plate and the hot stove. Dudley looked to be halfway through his second helping, and Vernon was still sorting through a stack of mail.

Hallie took a seat between the two, cringing as she was splattered with jam by her ravenous cousin. Petunia dumped a plate in front of her as well as one for Vernon and herself. The portions on Hallie's were noticeably smaller, of course.

The family ate in silence for a few minutes, Dudley and Vernon finishing first, while Hallie and her aunt ate with more patience. Vernon finally clapped his hands for attention, tired of waiting, and more than aware that his son would disappear from the table as soon as he was done eying the bacon grease in the pan.

"Petunia, Dudley... and you, too," he spared a disgruntled glance in Hallie's direction. "As you know, today is a very important day. It may well be the peak of my career if all goes according to plan..."

'Oh, yeah, his big dinner party...' Hallie could already tell this conversation was going to include quite a bit of threatening.

"The Masons will be coming to dinner tonight, and if the deal goes, Grunnings will be expecting a large order of drills by tomorrow, and we'll be on our way to a new summer house on the coast this time next year! Now, let's go through the plan one more time-"

"I will be in the lounge," Petunia said without prompting, "waiting to welcome them graciously into our home."

"Excellent," he grunted approvingly. "And you, son?"

Dudley looked stumped for a moment, before he swallowed the bit of toast he'd swiped from Hallie's plate, and said in a pompous tone, "I'll be waiting to open the door." Standing up from his chair was a struggle for Dudley, but when he finally managed it he bowed stiffly and simpered, "May I take your coats, Mr. and Mrs. Mason?"

"Oh, my sweet little boy's grown into a perfect gentleman!" Petunia burst out in tears.

"That a boy, Dudders!"

Hallie felt like gagging up her measly breakfast. She was distracted from her sickened stomach, however, by Vernon stabbing his fork in her direction as he asked, "And you, girl?"

"I'll be in my bedroom, plotting your demise-" she muttered under her breath. The family stared at her in a mixture of confusion, and horror for those who had actually heard, before Hallie coughed and added timidly, "I mean, making no noise and pretending I'm not even there."

"You'd better be," Vernon glared. "I may have put up with your funny business until now, but if anything goes wrong tonight..." He left the threat hanging before continuing as though nothing had been said.

"I will lead them into the lounge, introduce you, Petunia, and pour the drinks. At eight-fifteen-"

"I'll announce dinner."

"And, Dudley, you'll say-"

Hallie pretty much tuned them out at that point. She didn't see why they tried so hard. If they wanted the Masons to enjoy themselves, perhaps it would be better to just act natural. Polite conversation was most certainly *not* natural for the Dursleys. If anything was to go wrong, it would probably be when the couple grew frightened by the forced smiles and corny jokes. Hallie held no sympathy for them.

"Right- I'm off to purchase the dinner jackets for Dudley and me. The Masons will be here at eight, and you two are to stay out of your aunt's way while she's cleaning," Vernon ordered, mainly addressing Hallie.

They took that as their cue to leave. Petunia went straight for the Windex after giving her husband a peck on the cheek, and Dudley went straight to the big screen TV after trodding on Hallie's foot.

The girl herself wandered outside once her uncle was gone, limping slightly because of Dudley. She wondered if it was a bad thing that her toes were numb.

Hallie meandered down the sidewalk without any particular destination in mind, and tried to ignore the people staring as she passed. More than one neighbor was out chatting amiably while they mowed their lawns or walked their dogs. They would pause in their conversations once they caught sight of Hallie, then resume with an entirely new topic in hushed voices.

As if she didn't hear every word. It never ceased to annoy her that these people actually listened to the Dursleys. After her disappearance the previous summer, they had come up with a quick lie, saying she had gone off to boarding school, but not Hogwarts. They could never give out a name that unusual. Instead, it was the latest rumor that Hallie Potter was now attending St. Brutus' Center for Incurably Criminal Boys. They had made an exception for her at the all-boys school because she was just so dangerous that no one else could handle her. Hallie found it very offensive that no one in either world, Wizard or Muggle, seemed to care that she was, in fact, a *girl*.

This newest aspect to the Potter girl had only added to the idea that she was to be avoided at all costs. People watched her as though

she would snap at any time and go on a murderous rampage. At least it kept the local kids entertained. The younger ones were now daring each other to approach Hallie. She found a sadistic pleasure in the way she had managed to scare off every one so far. She couldn't help it that those little midgets just looked so funny scampering away every time she grinned.

As Hallie passed a random jogger walking their pet, the terrier growled at her from the end of its leash. It tried to keep up with the jogger by walking backwards and letting out a stream of squeaky barks before it finally gave up and turned away with an irritated huff. Hallie snorted. Even the animals on this street hated her!

Her steps finally led her to the old park. Hallie had many memories of its spiraling pathways and the twisted metal jungle gym. Most of them consisted of crouching in the sand and holding her breath while a bunch of rowdy boys searched for her.

Hallie eventually came to the swings and settled down on the only one with both chains intact. She dug her shoes into the sand and kicked off to get it moving a little. She supposed this was as good a plan as any for spending her day. Hallie let out a sigh as her momentum pulled her forward, and her hair blew back from her face.

"I can't wait until summer is over..."

"I can't wait until summer is over!"

Draco Malfoy would have never expected those words to leave his mouth, but alas, he meant every one. His summer was turning out to be unbearably frustrating, and he would rejoice whole-heartedly when it came time to return to Hogwarts.

He could not remember life at the manor ever being so... *suffocating*. He didn't know whether it was a change in his parents, or even his own growing temperament. All he knew was that it had all started the second he stepped through the barrier at King's Cross, and things had only continued to deteriorate from there.

First came the inevitable dressing down from his father. Draco had known it was coming as soon as he received his test scores from Snape. His scores had been some of the best in his year- second, in fact. But it was that placement that ruined his success. After all, he, Draco Malfoy, had come in second to a Mudblood. To his father, there was no greater shame.

Draco had tried to explain. The teachers favored that little know-it-all because she was cohorts with Harry Potter... He had still done his best, which was really quite exceptional in itself... He had come out on top of every one of his classmates in all his subjects, and nearly beat Granger in Potions thanks to Sev's extra tutoring... Wasn't that enough?

Obviously not. The bruises Draco still sported from his father's cane were evidence enough. Lucius had shouted for hours, until his cultured voice grew hoarse and his perfect hair disheveled. He had berated every one of Draco's faults from his apparent lack of maturity to his ignorance and arrogance. Draco thought it was all a bit rich coming from the man who had raised him to be his perfect little clone.

Not that he was foolish enough to tell his father that.

Since that rather unhappy family reunion, Draco had not seen much of either of his parents. His father spent most of his time locked away in his private office, behind a veritable fortress of silencing spells and impenetrable shields, doing Merlin knew what. His mother kept away from the manor during the day, making excuses to visit every one of her snobby acquaintances, for tea and such, and purposely turning a blind eye to her husband's odd habits.

Narcissa was quite used to his shady workings, and had learned over time that to ignore such things was probably for the best. Too bad Draco had yet to learn such a lesson. He was filled with curiosity over his father's behavior, and was hard pressed not to try and peak into the warded balcony every time he flew by on his broom.

He finally caught his first glimpse into his father's private sanctuary four weeks into the summer break. His father had been called away by the Board of Governors. It happened every time the Headmaster decided to appoint a new teacher. Draco was surprised by how early

into the summer the call had come. Usually, it took much longer for the old coot to find a new Defense teacher. Not surprising, as the position was rumored to be cursed. He wondered what poor sap had accepted the post this time. He was either disgustingly poor and desperate for work, or another cocky idiot who wanted to prove himself to the masses.

Lucius obviously hadn't been expecting the call so soon either, for as soon as the house-elf notified him of the message from the ministry, he took off toward the Apparition point on the manor grounds, stalking out of his office in a fury at the interruption to his time. He was so angry that when he slammed the office door, Lucius neglected to notice as it bounced lightly, and stayed open a small crack.

Draco stayed out of his father's way as he picked up his cane and swirled his cloak around his shoulders on his way down the stairs. Draco was still hovering around the forbidden door, a letter from his trip to the family Owlery still in hand. He could hardly believe his luck as he stared open-mouthed at the nearly invisible opening. A flicker of indecision passed through Draco's mind before he pushed it away and crept inside.

It hadn't been that long since he'd last entered the room, his first day back from school actually. The office wasn't as neat as Draco remembered. There were actually several books and pieces of parchment lying in a discarded pile on the desk. Lucius never allowed the house-elves in to clean unsupervised, and he hadn't bothered to summon one to do the task lately.

Nervously, Draco approached the desk, preparing to take a peak at one of the crumpled letters. A violet seal caught his eye, depicting two calligraphic letter B's entwined with an 'and' sign in the middle.

"Borgin and Burkes..." Draco muttered to himself. What kind of item was his father looking for that he would write to Borgin? Or better yet, what was he trying to sell?

Just as his fingers extended toward the letter, his father's fireplace flashed green, a sign that someone was preparing to Floo call. Panicking, Draco jumped back from the desk as if burned, and streaked out of the office. He pushed the door shut behind him just as

a man's voice called out from the fire. Draco hurried back to his room without looking back. There was no telling how soon before his father returned, and Draco couldn't afford for him to find out that Draco had been in his office. Still, he wondered who could have been calling for Lucius... The man didn't exactly have friends, allies was stretching it, enemies definitely, maybe... a tool... for whatever he was planning these days? Somehow, Draco knew he had to find out what that was. He wouldn't be able to just sit idle for the rest of the summer.

"Damn it, I'm starting to act as curious as a Ravenclaw," Draco scowled in disgust. He blamed it on boredom. Really, there were only so many days you could spend doing homework and playing Quidditch by yourself.

Now he just had to find a way back into his father's office. Another chance like today was unlikely to come up. What he needed... was help. Glancing down at the letter still in his hand, Draco smirked. And he knew just who to get.

"Dray, have you finally lost it?" Blaise cried in shock after hearing of his friend's latest plan.

"No," Draco answered calmly, proceeding as though he hadn't heard the despised nickname, "I am perfectly sane, but thanks for your concern. I just need to do this..."

The dark-haired boy snorted. "Do you have any idea what your father will do to you if he catches you sneaking into his office?"

Of all the crazy schemes Draco had ever concocted, this was by far the most dangerous. Sadly, Blaise did not doubt that he would get dragged into it, regardless of how much he protested. The blonde could be very persuasive when he wanted to be. And yet...

Blaise paled at a sudden thought. "Do you have any idea what Lucius will do to *me*?"

Draco rolled his eyes, *'Here he goes...'*

"Oh, I'll never see the light of day again! He'll kill you first," Blaise stated without much remorse, "but then he'll come after me! He'll probably curse me until I can't even blink without feeling pain, and then lock me in one of those tiny, dank cells I *know* you've got built under the manor-"

"Those haven't been used in years," Draco pointed out.

"-I'll go mad down there! I can't handle closed in spaces!" Blaise started to hyperventilate slightly. "I'm too young to die!" he moaned. "I haven't even had a girlfriend yet! Bloody hell, I'm not even interested in girls right now- But that's not the point! I refuse to die a vir-"

WHACK!

Draco put down the pillow he had used to slap Blaise and raised an eyebrow at his stunned friend. "Feel better now?"

"Yeah, a little," Blaise admitted grudgingly, rubbing his sore cheek. "Hold on," Blaise paused and then gaped at his friend. "Did you just bitch slap me with a pillow?"

Draco froze. Had he really done something so juvenile? "Of course not, you're just imagining things. Are you sure you're not the one who's lost it, Blaise?"

"Oy!"

Draco and Blaise walked through the manor at a casual pace, headed toward Draco's bedroom to prepare for their trip into Lucius' office. They passed Narcissa on her way out to meet up with Blaise's mother. The two women were taking a reserved portkey to wizarding Paris- to spend some time catching up, in their words. Blaise said they were just off to gossip. His mother was most likely going to brag about her latest conquest, a doddering old wizard from Brazil who owned shares in the South American branch of Gringotts. That meant two things, a large bank account and a nonexistent sex life. Blaise bet Draco ten Galleons that he wouldn't last past Christmas. Draco was counting on him to kick the bucket in January.

Normally, wizards lived quite a long time, having magic to extend their life span past that of a simple Muggle. However, no man lived long once he fell under Madam Zabini's lure. She was an amazingly well-preserved woman with a figure to die for and ambition to spare. Blaise had already gained and lost more step-fathers than he could count in his twelve years of life. His own biological father was nothing more than one of her past flings, and Blaise the byproduct of one too many drinks and a forgotten Protection Spell. Blaise himself disparaged his mother's black widow ways, but had never liked any of her sleazy husbands enough to say something about it.

"Are you sure you haven't changed your mind, Dray?" Blaise asked in an almost pleading tone as they reached his room.

"No. And don't call me Dray," he added as an after thought. Draco walked over to his wardrobe and began shuffling for something. "I know I put it in here somewhere..." he grumbled, tossing items out onto the floor in his haste.

Blaise sat on the edge of his friend's bed, twisting the hem of his shirt nervously. His mother would kill him if she ever caught him ruining the expensive silk. "What if your dad comes back early? We might not get out in time-"

"Relax," Draco said, still preoccupied by his search. "Father should be gone for most of the day- even longer than our mothers if we're lucky. He's going to be tied up at the ministry. The Department for the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts has been raiding private properties like mad. They even wanted free access into the manor, but Father won't budge. He was going down to speak with the minister about keeping that Muggle-loving Weasley under control. These raids violate our rights under the Wizarding Property Statute of- something..." he trailed off.

His father had been ranting about Arthur Weasley for weeks now, and Draco was getting thoroughly tired of hearing about it. He also thought it was a useless endeavor. Wizards would never stop baiting Muggles by enchanting their rubbish. It was just too easy to resist.

Blaise frowned thoughtfully. "Why are they searching here? I thought your dad had that sort of thing covered?"

"Oh, he does," Draco assured him, pulling out an unlabeled bottle from the bottom of the wardrobe. He uncorked it and took a sniff. Wrong one. He placed it gently aside. "Father's made sure they can't trace anything back to him, but you know, with his history, Weasley pushed for a search 'as a precaution.'" Draco sneered at those words.

"Doesn't really matter, though. They can search all they like, and they won't find anything."

"Let me guess," Blaise grinned, "hidden compartment in the library?"

"The drawing room actually," Draco corrected with a smirk. "Ah, here it is..." He lifted a crystal phial up for his friend to see.

"What is it?" Blaise glanced at it curiously.

Draco pulled out the stopper, and tilted it enough that some of the liquid inside was easier to see. It was a rather dull shade of blue, thick, and gelatinous. A smell not unlike rotting cabbages wafted through the room.

Blaise gagged. "I am so not touching that."

"Oh, come on, it's not that bad!" Draco protested, admiring the perfect color and texture of the substance. He had made it himself, after all.

"It's practically congealing in there!"

Draco shrugged. "It's supposed to do that."

Blaise balked as Draco came toward him with the bottle. "And you still haven't told me what it does!"

"This, Blaise, is a weaker variation of the Polyjuice Potion, known as *Cognatio Cream*. Make a small incision in your hand, rub a bit into your blood, and you will be temporarily gifted with the bloodline of yours truly. Lucky you."

"Isn't that illegal?" Blaise asked, relaxing a bit now that he knew he didn't have to drink the vile substance. He flinched again when Draco brought out a small dagger to cut his palm with.

"Of course it is, but Sev didn't seem to care much when he taught me how to brew it."

Draco made a small three-inch cut across Blaise's hand, snorting when the boy whimpered at the first sight of blood, and began to explain. "Thanks to this potion, you'll be able to bypass the initial wards into my father's office. They only prevent someone without the Malfoy blood from getting in."

Blaise hissed as the first drops of potion were absorbed into his blood. Then the cut sealed itself without leaving a trace of scarring. Holding his hand up for inspection, Blaise commented, "Why are you going to so much trouble to get me in with you? Why don't you just take a house-elf?"

Draco started packing things back into his closet. "Well, it would be more useful-"

Blaise made an offended sound in the back of his throat.

"-but Father's wards are set to block them as well."

"Draco, your dad's paranoid."

"Yes, he is," he agreed. "Okay, now I just need to cast a couple spells and we're all set!"

"What spells?" Blaise asked suspiciously.

Draco was slightly offended that the boy didn't trust him, but perhaps he had given Blaise reason not to over the years... Dismissing the thought, Draco pulled out his wand; ash, twelve inches, with a powdered dragon scale core, and he was very fond of it. He didn't hesitate to perform magic outside of school, knowing that the numerous spells surrounding the manor would provide interference to the ministry's scanners.

"First, we need to keep from being heard." Draco waved his wand in a circle between himself and Blaise. "*Muffliato!* Next, we need to keep from being seen." Without further ado, Draco rapped Blaise over the head with his wand, and then more gently tapped himself. Blaise

yelped from being hit so suddenly, then shuddered as he felt the sensation of something cold dripping down his shoulders. He watched as the color of his body seemed to bleed away, leaving his skin and clothes as clear as glass. Both he and Draco were nearly invisible. If either of them moved, however, a distorted shape could be made out.

"That's the best I can do," Draco said apologetically. "As long as no one looks directly at us, we should be fine."

"Where do you learn these things?" Blaise asked, impressed as a fellow second year who knew only the bare basics of spellwork.

"I read," came the sarcastic voice of his friend from somewhere to his left. "Now, come on, let's get going. Stick to the walls, but try to duck below any portraits before you chance walking in front of them. Grandfather Abraxas in particular has eyes like a hawk."

Blaise hurried after him, having a little trouble keeping up. "Dray, slow down!" he whined. "I don't even know which way Lucius' office is!"

They made it to the office door safely within ten minutes. They would have made it sooner if not for a few interruptions. The first was Blaise's whining. The prat didn't trust Draco's potion to get him through the wards. He trusted the potion even less after Draco casually informed him of how the wards were set to dispose of an intruder...

"Hey, Draco, what happens to someone if they try to get through without your potion?"

"Immediate decomposition upon contact with the spell trigger."

Blaise's face gained a chalky pallor. "WHAT?"

"Don't worry, I'm sure I brewed the potion right," Draco added.

"YOU DON'T KNOW IF IT WILL WORK?"

"I'm ninety-five percent sure. I didn't want to say anything in case you backed out on me."

"YOU'RE DAMN RIGHT I WOULD HAVE-"

"You might want to stop yelling now. Muffliato only distorts speech. I'd say that right about now the portraits two floors down can hear an abnormally loud buzzing sound."

The second interruption came in the form of an out-of-bounds house-elf. The thing- Dibby, or something like that- should have been in the kitchen, preparing dinner with the rest of the elves. Instead, they had run into him, literally, in the very hallway of their destination.

Blaise had been too preoccupied eyeing the portrait of Abraxas Malfoy to pay attention to anything below waist level. That was how he walked directly into the elf, who was muttering under his breath and looking distinctly nervous.

Draco would have stopped to scold the stupid creature if they weren't pressed for time. The house-elf had panicked and flailed around Blaise's legs before focusing on the two boys and squinting.

In a very sensible move on the elf's part, he had not asked what they were doing- not that Draco, as his master, had to answer- and had hurried off down the hall. He seemed to want as much distance between him and that corridor as possible.

Draco had the sudden notion that the house-elf could have preceded them into Lucius' office. It was, after all, possible for elves to accomplish some unusual feats with their brand of magic. Almost immediately Draco had dismissed the thought with a laugh. As if an elf could accomplish anything without his master's permission, and Lucius had certainly never given anyone the right to enter his private workshop.

Blaise gulped, eyes scanning over the doorway where he knew the magical wards were placed. He couldn't see them, but he could just imagine a shining trip wire and his own foot catching on it... Then his

screams of agony as the volatile spells descended on him, ripping, tearing, disintegrating his very skin and bones...

Suddenly, a transparent hand shoved him from behind, and he heard Draco's annoyed tone, "Just go in already, Blaise! I *promise* the potion will protect you."

Blaise took a shuddering breath and closed his eyes. Then he stepped forward...

His eyes shot open the moment he crossed the threshold into Lucius' sanctuary. He was alive? Blaise ran frantic hands over his torso, checking that everything was still intact. Realizing he was still as gorgeous as ever, Blaise let out a triumphant whoop.

Behind him, Draco rolled his eyes toward the heavens as if asking the gods for patience. The blonde quickly entered the room himself, then shut the door quietly. He tapped his joyous friend on the shoulder and said, "If you're quite finished, we have an office to search."

"Hey, Draco, how did your dad never think to put an extra ward up to block you?" Blaise asked as he scanned the bookshelf.

Draco barely glanced up from his perusal of the desk as he answered, "Obviously, he didn't believe I would do something so stupid."

"That man has more faith in you than I do."

Draco snorted. "Not much, there's still the portraits to keep watch, and spells to detect any magical signature foreign to his. Why do you think I haven't used my wand in here yet? Not to mention that he snaps at me if I loiter too long in this wing of the manor at any time..."

Blaise shook his head in disbelief at the lengths Mr. Malfoy would go to to keep his own son out of his office. What could he possibly be keeping in here that needed so much security?

As soon as the thought crossed his mind, Blaise's gaze landed on one particular book on the bottom shelf. He let out an awed whistle.

"Wicked! He's got a copy of *Darius Malkovitch's Compendium of the Forbidden Arts*! Do you have any idea how rare this book is?"

Draco raised an eyebrow. No wonder his father hadn't placed that book in the family library downstairs. "Didn't the ministry ban Malkovitch's works from the public? Something about giving ordinary wizards dangerous ideas?"

"Yes..." Blaise whispered, clutching the book to his chest in reverence. "Dray," he drew out the nickname beseechingly, "do you think Lucius would notice if I just borrowed this for a little while?"

"Yes!" Draco snapped. "Don't even think about taking anything out of here!"

"But, Dray..." Blaise cried, fingers tightening possessively around the book.

"No! Don't make me *Stupefy* you, Blaise." He waved his wand threateningly.

"Nice try, Draco," Blaise scoffed. "We both know you can't do any more magic while we're in here."

Draco sneered contemptuously. "No, but that won't stop me from tying you to a chair for Father to find when he gets home..."

Blaise blanched and placed the book back on the shelf.

"That's what I thought," Draco smirked.

He went back to shuffling through the papers on the desk. There was nothing of real interest out. The letter from Borgin and Burkes was long gone. Otherwise, Draco just found some crumpled letters from the ministry, lengthy bills for all of his mother's shopping, and a half-completed missive to Severus, who his father regularly corresponded with.

Draco decided to check the drawers next. The first was filled with spare parchment and ink wells. The second, however, was locked.

'That looks promising,' Draco mused. *'Now, how do I get it open?'*

"Hey, Blaise, come here and help me with this!"

"What is it?" The other boy came over, still wearing a sulky frown.

"I want to check in here, but it's locked."

Blaise examined the small keyhole under the drawer handle, hand resting against his chin in thought. Then he grinned at Draco and reached behind his head. That day, Blaise's longish brown hair was pulled into a low ponytail. To Draco's complete surprise, after his friend spent a moment searching, his fingers came away with a small Muggle hairpin. Still holding his confident smile, Blaise stuck the tiny instrument into the lock and began fiddling with it. Soon enough, there was the sound of a small click and the drawer eased open.

Draco watched as Blaise replaced the hairpin and gave his friend a flat look, "I'm not even going to ask..."

Blaise winked, "Smart move."

Finally reaching into the drawer, Draco found it was completely empty except for a single black book. Draco pulled it out carefully, examining the cover from front to back. *'I wonder what this is doing in here?'* If Draco wasn't mistaken, the book was a diary, and a *Muggle* one at that. He knew for a fact that his father wouldn't be caught dead with such a mundane object in his possession.

On a whim, Draco flipped the diary open, scanning for some sort of clue, but every single page was blank. He should have replaced the diary right then and moved on his search, but something prevented Draco from doing so. He had the strangest feeling that this was no simple diary. It looked plain and without a trace of magic on both the inside and outside, but Draco knew that appearances could be deceiving, especially in the wizarding world.

Something about the slim book was tingling at the back of his subconscious... He wanted to hang on to it, take some time to study it, maybe even write in it... Without even realizing it, Draco began to slip

the mysterious diary into the pocket of his robes, even as he eased the drawer shut-

"Hey, I thought you said we couldn't take anything?" The teasing voice sounded strangely far away. Draco didn't care, all that mattered now was the diary...

"Oy, Dray? Draco, snap out of it!"

"Huh?" came Draco's shockingly inelegant response as his blue eyes blinked wearily. Blaise was standing right in front of him, hands placed on his shoulders, and a look of concern on his face.

"Draco, are you all right? You zoned out on me for a minute," Blaise joked, even as his eyes moved over the blonde's face searchingly.

"I'm fine," Draco bit out more harshly than he meant to. His mind felt strangely foggy, and the disorientation caused him no small amount of anger. He was now positive there was something very wrong with that diary.

Draco had to force himself to put it back, and he nearly slammed the drawer shut in his haste to be rid of it.

"Draco?" Blaise called his name questioningly.

"Blaise, would you please lock that back up?" he asked, sounding oddly calm.

"Um, sure..." He pulled out his trusty hairpin and got back to work. Blaise glanced up as he caught Draco sitting down heavily in a nearby chair. "What just happened?"

Draco's head turned almost unwillingly back toward the desk drawer as he replied in a shaky tone, "I don't know."

That night, Draco lay in bed, feeling much more composed than after his run-in with the diary. He and Blaise had been forced to leave Lucius' office not long after the incident, when they were interrupted by the arrival of two chattering witches in the foyer.

Narcissa and Ms. Zabini had come home early from their trip, complaining loudly about the sort of riffraff let loose in magical establishments these days. It was to Draco's and Blaise's mutual disgust that they found out just whose presence had offended the women so. Apparently, the Gryffindor know-it-all herself had been prancing around Paris with a pair of filthy Muggles, most likely her parents. Trust Granger to screw up Draco's plans even when she was in another country.

Blaise had gone home with his mother after making Draco promise he wouldn't go back into the office, or make Blaise go with him, for that matter. Draco had laughed off the other boy's coddling, but agreed nonetheless. He had cleaned up any evidence of their presence beforehand, and tucked away the potions in his room. He also thought about Obliviating that house-elf, but unfortunately, he did not have the knowledge nor control to perform such a spell yet. Maybe in a few more years, but by then it would be rather pointless.

Lucius had returned just in time for dinner, looking perfectly smug as he assured his family that they would have no more problems with the ministry. Narcissa had been pleased, as she found the Aurors turning up at all hours particularly annoying, not to mention rude. Draco just nodded and tucked into his meal, trying to avoid catching his father's attention. He doubted he'd have been able to hide his secret foray if Lucius found any reason to suspect him.

Draco rolled over in bed once more. He was suffering from a terrible case of insomnia that night, although it wasn't really surprising. He just had too many things on his mind, mainly the diary still sitting in his father's desk. He knew without a doubt that his first assumptions had been wrong.

That diary was positively steeped in Dark magic. He had no idea what kind, but it was almost as if the book was... *sentient*. It had very easily wormed its way into Draco's thoughts, twisting them to comply to its own wishes. Draco found it eerily similar to the one time his father had introduced him to the effects of the *Imperius Curse*.

Draco now knew what his father had been up to all summer because he doubted the diary had been in the manor all along. Something that

powerful wouldn't have stayed locked away for long... Still, with his curiosity now sated, Draco wondered if perhaps he would have been better off not poking around into Lucius' affairs.

'I don't know what that thing was... but I shudder to think what Father needs it for...'

Almost unwillingly, Hallie made the short walk back to the Dursleys'. She was not at all looking forward to the upcoming dinner, but didn't see skipping it all together as an option. She was hungry, after all, and if she stayed out any later, her aunt was likely to lock her out.

'I feel like the family dog.' Hallie scowled. *'Of course, even a dog gets benefits.'*

"I'm home!" Hallie called out with forced cheer when she opened the door.

Her aunt hurried out of the dining room and into the kitchen. A lacy apron was tied over her salmon pink dress. She carried a pair of oven mitts under one arm and a broom in the other. With a harried expression on her face, she snapped at Hallie, who was leaning against the front door. "Get up to your room!"

Hallie rolled her eyes and complied. "I can just feel the love," she muttered.

On her way down the hall, Hallie passed her uncle, who was still primping in the bathroom. His face was turning an alarming shade of purple as he fiddled with the buttons of his dinner jacket. It seemed like a struggle as he finished the final two. Hallie noticed that the seams around his stomach and arms looked fit to burst.

'The man just won't admit to a lost cause. If this is how he fits in his jacket, I wonder what Dudley looks like-' Hallie shuddered at the sudden mental image *'-or... maybe I don't want to know.'*

Vernon's squinting eyes focused on her before she had even managed to open her door. He glanced up and down, evaluating her appearance from the old trainers coming apart at the sole to the windswept dark hair that fell around her shoulders in a disorderly mess. He sneered, causing Hallie to bristle at his scrutiny. Dropping his hands from the collar of his jacket, he stalked toward her.

"Now, listen here, girl, because I will only say this once," he growled under his breath in what he assumed was a threatening manner. Hallie heard a slight wheeze in his voice from his inability to breathe.

"You are going to stay up here tonight, and I don't want to hear a peep while the Masons are over! They don't have a clue of your abnormal existence, and I intend to keep it that way! One word, one creaky step, don't even cough-"

"I guess that means I can't use the bathroom either?" Hallie scoffed.

"Too right you can't! In fact, don't leave your room at all," Vernon added nastily before walking away.

"Gotcha," Hallie mumbled sourly. With that in mind, she turned from her door and decided to make a quick stop in the bathroom. Feeling rebellious, she flushed a couple times extra and banged all the cabinets shut for good measure. Hey, she had to get her kicks somehow.

Vernon bellowed something incoherent up the stairs, causing Hallie to snicker as she slipped into her room. Shutting the door with her back still to the room, she heard a scratching noise, and Hedwig screeched angrily.

Hallie sighed and turned around. "Sable, I thought I told you not to taunt Hedwig. One of these days, she's going to snap, and I won't be around to save you from getting your eyes pecked out- OH MY GOD!" Hallie screamed in shock, stumbling backward as she scrambled for the doorknob.

"GIRL, IF YOU DON'T QUIT THAT RACKET THIS INSTANT-"

"Sorry, Uncle Vernon!" Hallie called back meekly. Her hand moved slowly to her back pocket for her wand. Some *thing* was in her room...

A dark figure was perched on top of the wardrobe. It had large, pointy ears and bony limbs engulfed in a ragged pillowcase. Her cat was at least a third its size, but Sable had managed to corner it by blocking any escape route on the floor. He hissed at the creature, tiny silver teeth bared, and his normally sleek black fur jutting out in every direction. Hedwig was using her body to block the window as well. She hooted shrilly at the sight of her mistress, causing the strange creature to give a panicked yelp.

The sound of a doorbell resounded throughout the house, and Hallie heard the voice of her uncle greeting someone loudly. Dudley's nasally voice echoed up through the floorboards. "May I take your coat, Madam?"

A woman's voice followed. "Oh, what a polite young man! Why thank you, dear!"

It seemed that the Dursleys' guests had arrived. Hallie knew she would have to take care of the situation with caution now, and preferably silence.

Seeing her familiars had it covered for the time being, Hallie inched around the perimeter of the room, heading toward the desk. She flipped the switch on the old lamp that was missing a cover. Light flooded the room, and the intruder was revealed.

"A house-elf?" Hallie stated in disbelief. What the hell was an elf doing in her *Muggle* house? Better yet, whose elf was he? Certainly not from Hogwarts?

Unlike the first house-elves Hallie had encountered at the school, this one seemed to be in poor condition. His clothing was filthy and torn compared to the neatly pressed tea towel ensemble she was used to seeing. His skin was also a muddy brown color that looked sickly in her opinion.

He trembled upon seeing Hallie. With nervousness or excitement, she wasn't sure because at that moment the elf executed a perfect bow. He bent nearly in half doing so, and overbalanced. The elf tumbled off of the wardrobe and bounced harmlessly on her bed. Sable gave a snarling yowl that sounded like a war cry as he pounced.

"Sable, no!" Hallie caught him around the middle just in time. He squirmed to get free, his claws scratching up her arms in the process. The elf gave a sigh of relief knowing that he was safe from the mad kitten and finished his greeting.

"Harry Potter, it is an honor!" His voice was almost painfully high, but obviously male, and filled with reverence as he addressed her. As his

eyes were lowered to the bedspread, he missed Hallie's expression- a good thing, as it turned out.

Hallie gaped at him in horror, her mind going a mile a minute. *'How- Why- WHAT THE HELL! He knows I'm Harry- er, Hallie- whatever! But how does he know? Did someone tell him? But who could? Could he tell on his own? But I'm not under the glamour- What if someone else finds out-'*

"Is Mister Harry Potter sirs alright?" The elf sounded concerned as Hallie looked on the verge of fainting.

"I'm f-fine." Hallie cleared her throat. "Um, no offense, but who are you?"

"Oh!" The elf grinned up at her. "Dobby, sirs, Dobby the house-elf." He bowed once more. Hallie was getting rather embarrassed by all that. "Can Dobby asks sirs a question?"

"Oh, erm, okay?"

"Why is sirs looking like a female?"

Hallie blinked. Dobby didn't know she was really a girl. So, obviously, no one had told him... Hallie scrambled for an answer. Should she tell him the truth, or make something up? Shrugging to herself, she decided to deliver him an answer with a grain of truth.

"Well, you see... I'm in disguise!" Hallie felt a sudden burst of inspiration. "Yeah, it's a glamour the headmaster came up with. This way, no one knows I'm the Boy-Who-Lived, you know? He said it's safer this way."

'Safer my arse if a house-elf can just waltz in here!' Hallie was definitely having a talk with the headmaster about that.

Dobby nodded as though it made perfect sense. Hallie thanked whatever diety listening that house-elves weren't very bright.

"So, is there a reason you're here?" Hallie asked, getting to the point. "No offense!" Hallie hurried to add when she saw Dobby's ears droop

in disappointment. "It's just, well, this isn't the best time for me to have a house-elf in my bedroom."

'Not that there would ever be a good time,' Hallie thought silently. In the Dursley household, Hallie was the only oddity they would ever accept, and she was already stretching it.

Dobby had obviously noticed Hallie's frayed nerves and he tried to grin in apology. "Dobby understands. Dobby cannot stay too long, anyway, or he will be missed by his family-

"Family?" Hallie interrupted sharply. He definitely wasn't from Hogwarts. "Which family do you serve?"

The change that overcame Dobby then was what Hallie would later describe as schizophrenic. The humble, almost cheerful house-elf turned borderline suicidal in a matter of moments. His mouth clamped up tightly, and Dobby looked terrified and on the verge of passing out from the obvious lack of air that came from holding one's breath.

The elf began to make a keening noise in the back of his throat, and Hallie panicked. Jumping toward him, Hallie thumped him on the back a bit roughly, nearly sending him to the ground.

"Breathe, damn it! Breathe, Dobby!" she whispered harshly, still trying to keep the strange creature from passing out. When he shook his head determinedly, hands pressed to his mouth, Hallie got the point. "Dobby, you don't have to tell me who you belong to, okay? Just stop suffocating yourself!"

Dobby took in an enormous gasp of air at that, and Hallie sighed in relief.

What had just happened? Was there a reason Dobby couldn't tell her? Hallie was starting to reconsider keeping the unfamiliar house-elf in her bedroom for even a second longer.

"Dobby is sorry, sirs!" He stared up at her with pleading eyes. "Dobby cannot say who Master is. Now Dobby is running out of time, and Dobby must tell sirs. Dobby has come to warn Harry Potter!"

"Warn?" Hallie repeated weakly. This was just getting better and better.

"Yes, warn! It is very important that Harry Potter know... but Dobby does not know where to begin, sirs..."

"Well, why don't you sit down?" Hallie suggested. Dobby was still a bit pale, after all, and she somehow felt responsible for his condition, even if she hadn't personally cut off his air supply. It turned out she couldn't have chosen a worse thing to say.

"S-sit down?" Dobby gaped as though she had said something truly heinous. Then his bulging green eyes started to tear up.

Before he could burst out in full-blown sobs, as he seemed close to doing, Hallie whispered hurriedly, "Never mind! Don't sit down, Dobby! Forget I said it! Now, can you please just say whatever you wanted to tell me. I'm sure your family is very worried about you by now- FORGET I SAID THAT, TOO!" Hallie shrieked. Dobby's eyes ceased their leaking... and his hands stopped reaching toward his throat.

"This elf is going to be the death of me," Hallie muttered under her breath.

Talk about jinxing oneself.

"Dobby is sorry again, sirs." He sniffed a bit. "Dobby has been a very bad elf! Dobby will have to punish himself most grievously for leaving to visit Harry Potter..."

Great, now Hallie felt just terrible.

"He will have to shut his hands in the oven door.."

She wondered if she should send Dobby back with some bandages from the first aid kit... and rat poison, because Hallie was beginning to dislike the sound of his family. No sane elf should have been such a glutton for punishment as Dobby was.

"Dobby, if it's that bad, why don't you just leave your family. Go find another one?"

"Leave? Oh, no, Dobby cannot leave! A house-elf is bound to serve their family until death. Dobby can only be set free if Master gives Dobby clothes."

'And I thought I had it bad,' Hallie shook her head sadly.

"Is there anything I can do, Dobby?" Hallie took a seat on the bed next to Dobby, fighting the urge to give him a comforting hug. Knowing Dobby, he'd just spontaneously combust, or something.

"H-help Dobby?" He looked ready to wail out his gratitude, literally, but then an strange expression crossed Dobby's face. Hallie wondered if she should start worrying at the almost human glint of calculation in his eyes.

"Actually, there is something sirs can do for Dobby..." the elf hinted slyly.

"What?" Hallie asked warily.

"Harry Potter must not go back to Hogwarts!"

"WHAT?" Hallie screamed in a combination of shock and outrage.

She forgot to lower her voice, and there was a sudden hush from downstairs. Hallie slapped a hand over her mouth in horror.

"Dudley must have left the telly on, the little tyke!" Her uncle's voice reached Hallie as he climbed the stairs. It sounded almost amused to the guests, but Hallie heard the hidden threat in his tone as he thundered up the hallway.

Hallie backed away nervously from the door, then gasped when she realized that not only was there a bloody house-elf in her room, but neither Hedwig nor Sable were in their cages.

"Hide!" she hissed at the two animals, knowing they would understand. Hedwig leapt from the windowsill, flapping to gain height,

then disappeared somewhere in the direction of the roof. Sable ducked under the bed without a peep. Dobby was the only one left standing around, watching the well-practiced proceedings in confusion. Without hesitation, Hallie lifted him by the back of his pillowcase and shoved him into the wardrobe, slamming the door before he'd even regained his bearings.

The bedroom door banged open, and Vernon stomped inside. He stopped when he had already invaded Hallie's personal space, and growled into her face, "What the devil is going on in here?"

"Nothing," Hallie answered quickly.

"Then what was all that noise?"

"What noise?" Hallie tilted her head curiously as her uncle swelled with anger.

Vernon glared around the room, searching for anything suspicious to catch her with. Seeing nothing out of the ordinary, he scowled. With a final warning to keep it down, and a reminder that she had better be ready to work tomorrow, he returned to his guests.

Hallie grimaced once he was gone, and allowed Dobby to come back out. He hopped to the floor, frowning at Hallie as he pulled a hanger from where it was caught on his ear.

"Dobby, I can't stay here!" Hallie told him, still incredulous that he would even ask such a thing. "Do you see what these people are like? I need to go back to school on September first-"

"No, no, no!" Dobby protested stubbornly. "Harry Potter must not go back, or he will be in grave danger!"

"Huh?" Hallie blinked stupidly. Grave danger? Hmm... that did sound rather... dangerous. Wait- wasn't she *a/ways* in danger? Hallie could count on one hand the number of attempts on her life in just the past year alone.

"There is a plot, sirs, to make terrible things happen at Hogwarts this year! Harry Potter must not go back!" he repeated. "He is too important to lose!"

"I'm nothing important, Dobby," Hallie insisted quietly.

"Oh, but sirs is! He is the one who defeated He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named! The Wizarding World will forever be in Harry Potter's debt, especially the house-elves, sirs."

Hallie shrugged silently, knowing there was no convincing him otherwise. He was just like the rest of them. They all expected great things of her. Didn't anyone understand that Hallie was just... Hallie?

"Dobby, why tell *me* this? If someone's trying to hurt the school, shouldn't you tell the authorities, or Dumbledore even, someone who can actually *do* something-"

Hallie froze when she caught sight of Dobby's awed gaze still fixed upon her. With a sinking feeling, she realized just why he would come to her alone.

"Dobby... this doesn't have anything to do with... Voldemort-"

The elf cringed. "Ah, say not the name, sirs!"

'Oh, this is just ridiculous. It's just a name!' Hallie decided to humor him.

"Fine, You-Know-Who. This is about him, isn't it?"

Slowly, Dobby shook his head. "*Not He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named*, sirs." The way he emphasized the overly-hyphenated name led Hallie to believe he was trying to give her some sort of clue.

"He doesn't have a brother, does he?" she asked sardonically. "A sister? Distant cousin?"

Dobby continued to answer negatively each time.

"A crazy house-elf, perhaps?"

He actually seemed to consider that one, before coming to the conclusion that Voldemort did not, in fact, have a psychotic house-elf at his beck and call.

'Lucky him.' Hallie rolled her eyes.

"Well, I don't know anyone else who would try to kill me." Hallie said at last. "But you never know, maybe I'll be surprised this year, and make an enemy of a brand new freak! Tell you what, Dobby, I'll just keep an extra eye out between classes-"

"Dobby cannot allow Harry Potter to put himself in danger!"

"What do you think you're going to do about it?" Hallie grew worried by his determined glare in her direction. He couldn't really stop her from going to Hogwarts... Could he?

Dobby held up a clawed finger. "Sirs must give Dobby his word that he will not go back-"

"Dobby, I already said no-"

"Then sirs leaves Dobby no choice."

At those words, Dobby pointed his finger toward Hallie, wiggling his hand in preparation. The sickly elf seemed to double in size, his aura no longer as weak as Hallie had first perceived. Hallie didn't remember the extent of house-elf's magic, but she had the feeling she was about to find out...

But she was saved at last possible moment, by Sable of all things. The black cat darted from under the bed and sunk his pointed teeth into Dobby's finger. The elf let loose a responding howl of pain, and tried to shake him loose. Sable went flying with a bang, but landed safely on all fours and leapt back into the fray.

Hallie could only stand back and gape as the two creatures fought. Dobby seemed unwilling to outright damage her pet, while Sable held no qualms about shedding a little blood. Dobby finally realized he stood no chance of getting to Hallie with the vicious feline in the way.

Instead, he pulled open the bedroom door and escaped into the hallway, Sable not far behind.

Still staring after where the pair had been, Hallie could barely breathe. She dared not move after them, praying that at least one of them would knock the other unconscious before a disaster occurred with the Muggles. No such luck.

There was a loud screech from downstairs, which Hallie could not identify. With the feeling of her stomach plummeting to the ground, Hallie deduced that it could only be Mrs. Mason.

"Oh, no!"

With those words, Hallie raced out of the room. She made it to the scene of the crime in record timing, as her burning lungs could attest to. She also thought she may have twisted her ankle the wrong way while jumping down the stairs.

Hallie entered the dining room just in time to watch the magnificent frosted cake Petunia had spent hours on meet its sticky end.

Dobby's bulbous green eyes met Hallie's as he hovered the three-tiered sweet, filled with determination and a small shine of regret. Sable was yowling as he tried to reach the levitating elf. In order to get higher, the cat procured a launching pad. Too bad it just happened to be Mr. Mason's head. Sable streaked up the living room couch, pounced onto the middle-aged man, and then flew off, taking a slightly greasy toupee that was caught in his claws with him.

Sable never reached Dobby, as the house-elf vanished from existence in the next moment, after already sending the cake on its way. The frosted desert continued its path of trajectory, straight at Mrs. Mason.

Hallie flinched at the sound of glass shattering and food splattering. With her eyes clamped shut, she felt crumbs hitting her cheek.

The Dursleys stood flabbergasted at the scene. Mr. Mason was short one flimsy hair piece and fuming, while his wife snatched the hanky offered to her by Petunia and worked to wipe the sugar from her eyes.

Dudley was in shock, Petunia tearful, and Vernon looked ready to kill something. Poor Sable was the only one in his direct line of sight until the cat very sensibly slinked out of the room, disappointed at the loss of his prey.

'There is no way this can get any worse...' Hallie moaned pitifully. *'Dobby may as well have saved Uncle Vernon the trouble and slaughtered me first.'*

Just then, a very official-looking bird came crashing through the kitchen window. Mrs. Mason shrieked as the owl flew close enough for a wing to upset the curls on her head. The night's activities must have been too much for the poor woman, as she ran from the house screaming about lunatics and monsters. Mr. Mason was close behind her after he testily informed Vernon that Grunnings would never see a pence from his business.

Hallie's eyes still followed the regal owl as it soared around the room, finally settling on her shoulder. She reached a shaky hand up to untie the letter attached to its leg. It flew off immediately, and Hallie was left to open it alone under the burning gaze of her uncle. Something told her she wouldn't get away with taking the letter up to her room for privacy.

She turned over the yellow scroll, surprised by the unfamiliar seal holding it shut.

'I know I was desperate for mail, but this wasn't quite I was hoping for... Whoever sent this is going to get an earful on the train.'

Hallie was almost afraid to open it. Despite her only correspondents being Ron and Hermione- well, the only ones who had her address, they hadn't actually owled her yet- Hallie had a feeling this letter wasn't from either of them. The neat cursive she could already make out as she unraveled it immediately discounted Ron and his chicken scratch. The wizarding paper also meant it wouldn't be Hermione.

Hallie took a deep breath and scanned the opening line...

Her heart must have stopped beating because it felt as though her chest had been filled with ice. Hallie stared down at the dark ink that

had sealed her fate. It didn't help in the least that she could feel her uncle looming over her shoulder with a dark leer on his face.

"You didn't tell us you weren't allowed to do magic..."

His hot breath hissed into her ear as he spoke. A meaty palm landed on Hallie shoulder, tightening, fingers digging into the bone with a spark of pain. Hallie shuddered imperceptibly, except to the man behind her who was filled with adrenaline that he fed into his blind rage. Hallie didn't fight as she was yanked around forcefully. She gulped as her face tipped back to see her uncle.

Her mind barely registered the raised hand aiming for her face.

"AND YOU CAN BLOODY WELL STAY THERE THE REST OF THE SUMMER! DON'T EVEN THINK YOU'RE GOING BACK TO THAT FREAK SCHOOL OF YOURS!"

The bedroom door slammed behind her, and Hallie heard the sound of the hastily attached lock clicking shut. It wouldn't be the last of them, as her uncle had promised to add the finishing touches to her cell in the morning.

With a painful wince, Hallie pushed herself up from where her uncle had callously thrown her to the floor. She was unharmed for the most part, except for the sting on her face from his first hit. Vernon had been quite stunned after she fell, as he had never had the guts to use physical punishment on her before. When there was no sign of lightning coming to strike him down for his actions, he had appeared all too willing to continue. Hallie had sat gobsmacked until Petunia jumped into action, warning her husband that *they* would know if she was harmed.

He had barely reigned in his temper with that reminder. However, it had not stopped Vernon from ranting at Hallie, employing every insult in his old arsenal from her utter uselessness to her equally-worthless parents. He had vented an entire year's worth of fury, ever since the zoo incident the previous summer. Hallie's threats about magic had obviously come to mind as well. Then he had dragged her to her room with the promise that she would never see her school again. He

was nearly gleeful as he took away her trunk and locked it in the cupboard under the stairs.

Hallie counted herself eternally lucky that she'd had the foresight to keep her most precious possessions under the loose floorboard, mainly her cloak, photo album, wand, and Dumbledore's charm. At least those were safe in the event that Vernon tried to destroy anything in her trunk. This would also prove useful for the plan already formulating in Hallie's mind.

She was determined not to spend another day in that hell-hole. Who cared if she had nowhere else to go? Anywhere would be better, even a cardboard box on the streets. Hallie would just wait until they let her out to make a break for it. She couldn't climb out the window as Vernon had nailed that shut right away. She also couldn't risk using magic again. Apparently those stupid underage magic laws were serious, even when Hallie hadn't been the one doing anything. But she wouldn't take any more chances. She couldn't be expelled from Hogwarts! Then Hallie would truly have nowhere to go.

Sighing, she climbed into bed, not even bothering to change out of her clothes. She was exhausted from the events of just the past two hours, but it seemed her mind was far too busy to allow sleep.

Hallie hissed when her cheek touched the pillow. With gentle fingers she probed the area under her eye.

'That's definitely going to leave a mark. At least it should be gone before I see my friends-'

If she ever did.

Slowly, Hallie's eyes wandered around the room as she pondered her situation. It was just inconceivable that a house-elf had turned up in her bedroom. And she still didn't know who he belonged to! Was he there on someone's orders? It was rather suspicious that he would try to keep her from going back to Hogwarts, even if someone was "supposedly" out to get her.

"It wouldn't surprise me in the least if Dobby belonged to some snobby Slytherin just trying get me into trouble." Hallie glared at the wall.

'At least he doesn't know I'm a girl,' Hallie consoled herself. 'Although,' she frowned, 'I don't fancy the rumors that are going to start up if he tells them I disguise myself as a girl during the summer. Yep, Harry Potter, cross-dresser extraordinaire. That won't help my reputation at all- even if it is partially true.'

"Ron and Hermione will get a kick out of it though-"

'I've got to stop depressing myself like that.'

Hallie forced her thoughts to move on.

'I wonder whatever happened to Sable... I can't believe he ditched me like that... I hope Hedwig's all right... And what ever happened to the Masons? That was pretty funny, though... Petunia looked like she would keel over from the shame...'

Some part of Hallie realized that she was trying to make light of a potentially ominous situation. For a while, she was actually able to ignore things. Then it happened.

Her gaze was still roaming the room in acknowledgment of her insomnia when Hallie spotted something new. Silhouetted by the street lights filtering through the window, there was something pale and crumpled lying on the floor. Hallie sat up and stared.

It was a stack of parchment envelopes, and they seemed to have fallen out of the open wardrobe. It was the wardrobe that she had shoved Dobby in to hide him from Vernon. And now there were letters tied together with twine sitting in her room. Letters with the name "Harry Potter" on them. Letters that were addressed in very familiar script. Hermione, Ron, and even Hagrid's untidy scrawl.

Her friends had *not* ignored her all summer.

They had sent very many letters, in fact.

Letters that *someone* had kept from her.

That elf was so dead.

Ron Weasley shoved another forkful of scrambled eggs into his mouth, barely tasting them as he chewed and swallowed mechanically. His eyes drifted away from his plate to the open window over the kitchen sink, scanning almost desperately over the empty skies. Still no sign of Hedwig.

The redhead sighed and put his fork down, resting his chin on one hand and glaring at the table as though it had murdered his best friend. For all Ron knew, it could be true, seeing as Hallie hadn't replied to a single letter all summer. There was no explanation for it! Hallie had bemoaned going back to her aunt and uncle's for weeks before the school year ended, and Ron couldn't blame her. Those Muggles had seemed like a right unpleasant lot at the station, and he could only imagine the sort of summer she was having, forced into the company of people who couldn't stand the sight of her. So, yet again, Ron couldn't help but wonder, "WHAT THE BLOODY HELL IS GOING ON?!"

His open palm slammed down on the table, startling the other Weasleys. Ron only realized he had spoken aloud when his mother glowered and barked, "RONALD BILIUS WEASLEY, LANGUAGE!"

"But, Muuumm..." Ron whined halfheartedly.

"No excuses, Ronald! I've taught you better than-"

"Mum," he decided to head her off this time, "can't we please go get Hal-rry?" He stumbled over Hallie's alias and hoped no one had noticed. It was bad enough trying to tell them about all about his friends at the beginning of the summer, when a flash of his best mate's normal grin on a delicately effeminate face framed by long black hair always interrupted Ron's reminiscing. It was still a leap for Ron to connect the Boy-Who-Lived and his best mate to the pale girl lying in the hospital wing.

Ron gave himself a mental shake to get back on track. He could deal with Harry's gender switch later. "Who knows what's happened to him? Those Muggles could be... torturing him!" he waved his clenched fork for emphasis, flinging a bit of egg onto the table. "He could be locked up and starving to death!"

Ron knew exactly how to manipulate his mother. Just hand her a hungry, emotionally deprive orphan, and she'd go on a rampage.

To think how close he was to the truth of Hallie's summer...

Mrs. Weasley pursed her lips, half of her instincts wanting to find the poor dear and smother him, the other half wanting to scold Ron for the dramatics. Her husband intervened before things could get messy.

"Come now, Ron, I'm sure it's not nearly that bad-"

"You don't know them, Dad!" Ron burst out.-

Mr. Weasley tiredly rubbed the bridge of his nose. His hours at work had doubled lately due to the raids in his department. Too bad the pay hadn't picked up as well.

"Ron," he began, feeling as though this was going to be a repeat of the same argument, "you know we can't just turn up at the Dursleys' home-"

"But why not, Dad?" Fred (or was it George?) decided to join in.

"Yeah, just think of all the fascinating things you could play with while we bust Harry out," George wheedled this time. "I bet they have a fellytone..."

"Don't even think about it, Arthur!" Mrs. Weasley snapped. Mr. Weasley's shoulders took a noticeable slump in disappointment.

"I've already spoken to Professor Dumbledore," Mrs. Weasley said to the room at large, seeing as even her youngest looked ready to argue for the boy she had a crush on, "and he wants Harry to remain with his relatives for a while longer. The way he made it sound, I think Harry is a good deal safer in a Muggle neighborhood-"

"We could protect him!" Fred argued, with utmost confidence in his ability to guard one scrawny little Gryffindor.

“And we have just the thing to do it!” George added, grinning in a dangerous fashion. Ron shuddered. He just hoped they weren’t going to test it on him first.

“Don’t even start, you two!” Mrs. Weasley reared over them like an angry lioness, causing the twins to cower a bit at the tone in her voice. Their earlier bravado faded quickly. “You’re still not off the hook for blowing up your bedroom again- Merlin only knows what you were tinkering with this time! I expect you outside and de-gnoming the garden as soon as you finish eating! And when you’re done with that, you can help me around the house today-”

“What!” Both twins looked scandalized.

They had indeed caused a rather spectacular explosion the other day. Ron wasn’t sure how they managed it, but the noxious yellow smoke still seeping out of their bedroom window provided testament to the fact. Their father was ready to call in the Magical Hazards Department if the fumes didn’t dissipate soon. Until then, Fred and George were bunking in Charlie’s old room. They had gotten off lightly- Although, perhaps Ron should revise that opinion, taking in the frightening scowl on his mother’s face. She looked a bit like Snape in that light... and Ron was going to make sure he never entertained that image ever again.

“What’s all the racket down here?” Percy pompous vocals preceded him as he trumped down the stairs and entered the kitchen. He was carrying his owl Hermes on one arm and clutching a neatly tied scroll in the other. Percy strode toward the kitchen window as the others gave him a scattered rundown of the situation, Ginny’s sounding more frank, while the twins were still protesting their grievous punishment.

Ron watched his older brother give Hermes directions, and his eyes lit up gleefully as a thought came to him.

“Hey, Percy?” Ron called tentatively for his attention, still looking at what had to be the most stuck-up bird in existence as Hermes waited as stiff as a broomstick for the letter to be fastened on.

“What do you want, Ron?” Percy responded, not even bothering to look up.

“Could I borrow Hermes?”

Percy turned to Ron with a flat expression, and even the bloody bird had the nerve to stare down its beak at him. “No.”

Ron glared at them both, his ears turning red. “Why not?”

“Because I need him for something far more important than hounding Harry Potter’s relatives. Just because the boy hasn’t owed you back is no reason to annoy his aunt and uncle,” Percy said in what everyone in the kitchen easily recognized as his lecture voice. “Besides, you’ve already put Errol on his death bed by sending him to Surrey twice a day for two weeks; I don’t need you putting Hermes at risk as well.” The aforementioned owl gave an agreeable hoot.

“Just what’s so important about that letter, Perce?” Fred asked, sounding far too innocent for the widening smirk across his face.

“Maybe it’s a looove letter!” George teased, puckering his lips in a mocking kiss.

“Oh, who’s it for, Percy?”

“Yeah, just who have you been snogging that we don’t know about-“

“Is it a girly Gryffindor-“

“Or a happy Hufflepuff-“

“Maybe another genius like Percy?” Fred wondered speculatively.

“Could be a Ravenclaw-“

“As long as it’s not a Slytherin-“

“Well, I did see him making eyes at the one girl, Forge-“

“I did not-“ Percy sputtered.

"Yeah, what was her name, Gred?" the twin tapped his chin thoughtfully. "Something-Macnair...?"

"Macnair?" Mr. Weasley sat up in disapproval. "Now, Percy, that sort of girl isn't-"

"I think it's brilliant!" Ginny sighed suddenly, interrupting her father's reprimand. A glazed look entered her eyes that rather disturbed Ron. It was far too much like the one she wore while he'd recounted Harry's fight with the troll on Halloween. "A forbidden love between two sworn enemies, bound by the expectations of others in a way that denies them the chance of ever expressing their true feelings-"

"Ginny, what on Earth have you been reading?" Mr. Weasley asked with a flabbergasted glance at his little girl.

Mrs. Weasley patted her hair nervously and cleared her throat. She took a discrete step in front of the wobbly bookcase beneath the family clock when she thought no one was watching, blocking the stacks of winking Gilderoy Lockhart covers and old copies of Witch Weekly with her apron.

Ron snorted.

"Well, I supposed we can support you, Perce..." Fred said in a commiserating tone.

"What's a little house rivalry in the face of..." George paused and grimaced as though he'd swallowed stink sap, but he was also fighting back a twitch in the corner of his mouth.

"True love," Ginny finished his sentence for him, adding another dreamy sigh. Ron was beginning to wonder if Hallie was safer in Surrey. At least from his younger sister, who'd vowed to become Mrs. Harry Potter when she was seven.

"Percy, please reconsider," their father pleaded, his eyes still drifting worriedly toward Ginny every now and then. "You've met the girl's father, Percy, and he's a ruddy bast-"

“ARTHUR, LANGUAGE!”

Percy seemed to shrivel from his position against the kitchen window, and the scroll was twisted beyond recognition in his wringing hands. “I have no interest in that girl! I don’t even know her! I was just taking away house points!” He needed to shout to be heard over them.

“Ah, well you’ll never get a girl that way, Perce!” Fred shook his head reproachfully.

“I don’t have a girlfriend!” Percy protested weakly. He never had been any good at lying.

“And that is exactly the point,” George said wisely.

“You’re too uptight, Percy-“

“You need to get laid-“

“FRED! GEORGE!” Both Percy and his mother yelled out at the same time. While Mrs. Weasley looked angry, her eyes darting toward her youngest children, poor Percy looked absolutely mortified.

Ginny giggled behind her hands, and Ron nearly fell out of his chair laughing. Mr. Weasley tried to hide his grin behind a coffee mug, his consternation fading. He was sure that the twins had it wrong. Percy would never date Macnair’s daughter... Right? His hand twitched around the coffee cup.

“Well, let’s have a peek at it,” Fred shoved his chair away from the table.

“We can give you some tips!” George added with an evil leer.

The twins stood with equally mischievous grins and moved toward Percy like a pair of preying hyenas, and Percy was the prey as his eyes searched desperately for an escape route.

"N-no thank you! It's just fine the way it is! I don't need any help from you!" Percy said in a panic, moving to block his owl from the twins.

"Methinks the lad doth protest too much, Gred-"

"You may be right, Forge-"

"All the more reason to see what he's hiding-"

"I'll second that!"

Percy's entire face was scarlet by that time, and he fought to keep the letter out of George's grasp. He practically threw Hermes out the window in his haste to have it gone, and Ron felt a bit of vindictive pleasure when the owl screeched furiously before flapping off.

"Children, leave your brother alone," Mrs. Weasley admonished, taking pity on the blushing prefect.

Percy wore a grateful expression that the twins immediately caught, prompting a bit more teasing on their part. Percy was such a suck-up sometimes...

The family squabble continued for the remainder of breakfast (which went surprisingly uneaten), with the twins poking fun and Percy trying to ignore them, his mother attempting to settle everyone down, and Ginny begging Percy for details on his sordid love affair. Mr. Weasley finally stood up with a tired groan, unheeded during the chaos, and pecked his wife on the cheek before Flooing out to work.

Ron was the only one still sitting quietly in his chair at that point, pushing around the cold food as he brooded. He was still no closer to bringing Hallie to the -

Burrow. There just had to be some way to get her out of Privet Drive, since it was obvious that Hallie wasn't able to contact him. Ron's brow furrowed in thought. He may have been brilliant at chess, but that didn't mean he knew how to plan a rescue attempt. Breaking and entering was more Fred and George's forte. Besides, he couldn't do this on his own... If only he could ask for help, but he couldn't risk

bringing just anybody on such short notice. Hallie was bound to look like a girl when they found her, rather than the boy Ron knew his parents and siblings were expecting. He needed someone he could trust with Hallie's secret, or better yet, someone who knew-

At that moment, the fireplace roared to life, the flames glowing emerald green. A stout trunk came flying out first, hitting the kitchen tiles hard enough to make one think it was filled with a ton of bricks-or books, as the case may be. A familiar figure stumbled out next, nose wrinkled at the liberal amount of soot dusting their clothes, and smoothing bushy brown hair out of their eyes.

Ron's freckled face glowed as realization dawned on him, and he broke out in a wide smile. Hermione Granger, back early from France, started to return the smile until Mrs. Weasley distracted her with a rib-cracking hug and began fussing over the state of her.

That was his answer, Ron thought. Forget what his parents said, and Dumbledore was off his rocker if he believed that Ron would leave his best mate hanging! He was determined to retrieve Hallie before the school year began, even if he wasn't yet sure how. At least the Headmaster couldn't take house points during the summer. Now, Ron just had to convince Hermione to break a few rules.

That could take a while... Scratch that. Hallie was bloody well screwed.

"Absolutely not!"

"C'mon, Hermione!"

"Have you lost your mind, Ronald?" she hissed. "We can't just up and leave! What if we're caught? What will your parents say?"

"Who cares?!" Ron shouted back. He then lowered his voice and asked her accusingly, "Don't you want to help Hallie?"

"Of course I do!" Hermione snapped, offended. "But I just don't think we should go without permission, and all the way to Surrey, in the middle of the night! I'm sure if we just wait a little longer-

"I'm sick of waiting!" Ron spat. "You, my parents, Dumbledore- you all want me to wait! What if Hallie's in trouble? She's our best mate! How can you just stand here and say we should leave her to rot?"

"I can't," Hermione's voice cracked. "I feel just as awful, Ron, but there's nothing we can do. Besides, what if we're just over-reacting? Maybe Hallie has just been busy, or she just can't owl us- you know her aunt and uncle probably wouldn't approve of owl post. Or maybe she's already on her way over. Maybe-"

Hermione knew she was making excuses, she was equally upset about the silence from Hallie, but she just couldn't force herself to blatantly go against her every instinct, and they were telling her one thing: Listen to those older and wiser than herself. Hallie and Ron hadn't had that much of a bad influence on her yet.

"-Maybe her letters just got lost," Hermione continued. "Maybe Hedwig is still flying somewhere between here and a hotel in France, for pity's sake! The poor owl -

could be struggling across the entire countryside. She could be caught in bad weather. She could be-"

"She's here!" Ron interrupted suddenly, eyes wide with disbelief.

"Yes," Hermione nodded tearfully, not looking up, "she could even be right here- What?"

Bushy brown curls snapped up at a soft clicking outside, and Hermione's gaze followed Ron's to the sealed window, where a snowy white owl flapped tiredly to stay airborne. Hedwig tapped her beak against the glass again, giving the two children an irritable stare as they stayed frozen.

Ron was up in a flash, shoving the window open. Hedwig glided inside immediately, landing upon the orange carpet with a graceless flump.

"Hedwig!" Hermione cried, crouching at the owl's side. She was shocked by the bird's sudden arrival, but even more so by her condition.

Hedwig's feathers were a dingy gray and bedraggled, as though she hadn't taken the time to sort them out. Her beak was parted in an obvious pant, and her tail feathers quivered with exhaustion.

"Bloody hell, what happened to her?" Ron wondered, as he brought over one of Errol's water dishes. Hedwig perked up visibly at the sight and dipped her beak into the clear water eagerly.

"She doesn't have a letter," Ron pointed out in a curious tone. He bent his head toward the owl and spoke in a careful voice. "Hedwig, did Hallie send you?"

Hermione watched in bemusement as Hedwig's amber eyes followed Ron with a human-like intelligence and her head finally swiveled in a negative response.

Ron cursed under his breath. "But if she didn't send you, then what are you doing here?"

Hedwig blinked slowly for lack of words.

"Erm, right, uh..." Ron fumbled for an easy question.

"Did you come here for Hallie?" Hermione spoke up.

Hedwig bobbed her head.

"This proves it!" Ron jabbed one finger in the owl's direction triumphantly. "See? Hallie needs our help!"

"Well, yes, but..." Hermione bit her lip.

"Are you really gonna leave her there, Hermione?" Ron pushed, already knowing the answer.

“Oh, fine!” Hermione threw her hands up in defeat, and Ron gave a small cheer. Even Hedwig cooed in relief, sagging further into the water dish.

“But how are we going to get to Surrey?” Hermione pointed out the major flaw in Ron’s plans. “I suppose we could find a map, but it’s certainly too far to walk, and I don’t have enough Muggle money for a taxi. I don’t know about Wizarding transportation, either, or who would be stupid enough to take two second years all the way there without asking any questions, and-“

“The car!” Ron suggested, secretly glad to put an end to Hermione’s babbling.

It was rather opportune that he remembered his dad’s car at that moment, some Muggle contraption he’d brought home without telling their mother. Ron had seen him stash the thing in the garage one day after work, claiming he’d picked it up from an old squib’s house. After that day, Ron had caught the man poking around under the hood with his wand, mumbling spells and sputtering every time the car let off a belch of smoke or splattered him with petrol. He’d been modifying it -

in his spare time, claiming that as useful as Muggles were, their creations held so much more potential...

And that was why the car could fly. Not to mention it turned invisible.

It was so wicked.

Fred and George had taken it for a test run, another one of their exploits that all of them had unanimously agreed Mrs. Weasley was better off not knowing. Even Mr. Weasley’s lips were sealed tight unless he was eagerly questioning the twins on how it went.

The car was ideal for this situation! He and Hermione could fly it to Hallie’s house, and they could do it at night, so the invisibility booster wouldn’t even be needed!

Hermione’s voice, and the suspicious narrowing of her eyes, brought Ron back down to Earth.

“Your family has a car? Why?”

Ron shrugged. “Dad’s obsessed with Muggles. He thinks they’re interesting.”

Hermione looked a tad insulted that her parents were considered interesting from a Wizard’s perspective, but she chose to let the comment slide. “Do you even know how to drive it?”

“Nope!” Ron replied cheerfully. “But how hard can it be?”

Store fronts and street lamps throughout the city of London glowed like a thousand fireflies, and the shining face of Big Ben was a particular source of light in the black velvet sky. The minute hand jerked into place just beneath its hourly brother, and a booming chime echoed over the wind, ringing twelve consecutive times. The last note faded into the night, and all went unnaturally silent.

Suddenly, a rumbling noise made itself known in the vicinity of the clock tower, growing with an alarming intensity. The engine-like hum was interrupted by sporadic chokes and gurgles, the kind caused by an old car that was long overdue for a checkup. This didn’t make sense, however, for the only cars visible at the midnight hour were the delivery trucks and occasional cabby sailing down the highway, and certainly nowhere near the very peak of Big Ben. And yet, if any poor, unsuspecting bloke, such as the guardsman (who was fortunately on his coffee break), were to look out from the clock face’s perspective, then they would see a very solid, and very airborne, Ford Anglia barreling toward them. They would probably suspect lack of sleep or a little too much to drink at the pub. Muggles were such wonderfully oblivious individuals.

The power of Muggle denial aside, the flying car was, in fact, very real, as were the two wide-eyed, screaming children in the front seat.

“RON, LOOK OUT!”

“BLOODY HELL! WHERE DID THAT COME FROM?!”

“TURN LEFT, LEFT! NO, YOUR OTHER LEFT!”

“AAAAAAHHHHHHH!”

(cringes away from reviewers)

I'M SORRY I SUCK SO MUCH AT UPDATING! BLAME MY
COLLEGE HOMEWORK!

It was dark, and it had been that way for quite some time, in fact. All was silent, and there was no sense of sight or touch or smell. His surroundings rarely changed, although, in recent months, such a movement had indeed occurred. The world was now small, closed in, and the electric tingle of wards surrounded it. But then, one day, there was light, and fingers reaching and grabbing. A torrent of feelings and thoughts rushed in... curiosity, a touch of wariness, and then dim confusion... Starving strings of magic, weakened from disuse, tried to cling to the other entity, desperate to search its soul. A scatter of images was its reward.

Silver hair and pale skin, dimly lit dungeons, moving staircases, black robes and green-striped ties, a head of scruffy black hair and a pang of resentment, burning emerald eyes, a dark forest, the bleeding flanks of a snow white unicorn, a stooped figure slurping the precious liquid... the sweet, heady scent of Dark magic... the boy's blinding fear...

The tide of confusion grew stronger, a sense of wrongness was perceived, and the other entity pushed. An old emotion arose then, amusement at the pitiful fight, but he released the boy, nonetheless. His strength was not yet returned, although a taste of the boy had helped. Detachment. The darkness crept back in. Silence... but for now, patience was there as well. He would wait. The light would come back soon and, with it, another's thoughts... But next time, he would not let them go so easily...

Hallie shot awake in a cold sweat, a foreign glee simmering in her belly even as she wiped the moisture from the back of her neck and squinted against an oncoming headache. A pulse of pain emanated from just above her right eye, and Hallie didn't even think of her scar until her fingers were running over the jagged mark.

'Just what the heck was that?' she wondered, feeling rather disgruntled about the interrupted sleep, and forcing down any remaining unease from the dream. The fear was fading quicker than Hallie would have thought possible, and the oddly familiar images were slipping through her fingers faster than the rubies in the Gryffindor Points Counter during first year Potions. She tried to

concentrate on the remaining details, until a hungry rumble interrupted her thoughts.

Hallie glared weakly at her empty stomach for reminding her of things better left unsaid. Her neck wasn't feeling too great, either, but Hallie knew that was the consequence of falling asleep sitting up. She was leaning against her bedroom door with her legs curled beneath her, and her cheek sticking uncomfortably to the wooden surface.

Hallie groaned and tried to glance at the window while moving her neck as little as possible. A dark, gloomy sky greeted her, and the occasional flash of lightning illuminated the new iron bars. The shadows cast upon Hallie were quite fitting for the isolation and imprisonment that she had been enduring ever since the Masons came over for dinner. She had never believed that life at the Dursleys' could get any worse, but then, Hallie had never been locked in any room—including her cupboard—for three days straight. The four walls of Dudley's second bedroom were beginning to close in on her, and Hallie had never wished so desperately to have her dawn to dusk chore list. At least preparing the Dursleys' meals ensured that she would get a scrap or two to eat. Now, Hallie was living off of stale bread and whatever canned item her aunt happened to pluck first from the cabinet.

She hadn't seen a soul for days; unless she counted watching the neighbors through the barred window (Hallie still wasn't sure how they missed that abnormality). Her only company of late had been Petunia's infrequent visits to let Hallie use the toilet, and Dudley jeering from the hall and rattling the seven padlocks on her door for fun. Sable was laying low since the pudding incident, although Hallie had seen him once on the tree outside, and she asked to him to keep an eye out for Hedwig. The snowy owl had vanished after flying out the window during Dobby's visit, and Hallie could only hope that her uncle hadn't found Hedwig first; he was always threatening to shoot the poor bird.

If Hallie was lucky (which really wasn't often), then maybe someone would rescue her before the summer ended. They were at least bound to notice when she didn't turn up at the feast on September 1st. Her presence as the Boy-Who-Lived was practically a requirement

now, and Hallie's only optimism was that most of the new Muggleborns wouldn't know of her. Then again, if they were anything like Hermione, they would have purchased her entire biography and started researching curse scars even before the Sorting...

Relating to the matter of her two best friends, Hallie was glad to have solid proof that her worries had been unfounded. After Dobby's thievery, Hallie knew that they had dutifully written once a week, twice in recent weeks, and had sounded quite concerned in their letters. Actually, the ones from Hermione, after pestering her about homework, had degenerated into scolding and threats if she didn't reply soon. Ron's had been of a similar vein, although he was working to bribe Hallie with a visit to his home—after warning her about his hero-worshipping sister. His last letter had been more serious, though, and Hallie almost didn't recognize Ron's tone. His words had seemed a little suspicious, and hinted that Hallie would be coming to the Burrow regardless of whether the Dursleys gave permission or not.

Hallie thought that was a fine promise. Bloody hell, even Snape could drop in for tea and it would make her day. Anything was better than spending another day with her loving family.

And speaking of...

Aunt Petunia's clicking heels preceded her down the hall. Hallie used the opportunity to plead her case once more in a polite and logical manner.

"OPEN THIS BLOODY DOOR!" Hallie screamed. The footsteps stopped. "YOU CAN'T KEEP ME HERE! JUST YOU WAIT UNTIL SEPTEMBER! MY FRIENDS WILL COME FOR ME—THE ENTIRE FREAKY WIZARDING WORLD WILL STORM THE FRONT LAWN, BLAST IN THE DOOR, AND THEN TURN YOU ALL INTO TOADS! THEN I'LL GLADLY HAND YOU OVER TO MY POTIONS PROFESSOR—THAT'S RIGHT, I SAID A MAGIC WORD! WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO ABOUT IT, HUH? LOCK ME UP? MAGIC IS REAL AND I AM A WITCH—SOMEDAY YOU WILL ALL SUFFER MY WRATH!"

Hallie cackled a bit for effect, knowing she sounded like a lunatic. She felt a satisfied grin stretch across her face as blood pressure returned to normal, hearing hushed and frantic muttering outside her room. Loud and violent threats had become the norm since her imprisonment, and Hallie knew that appealing to the Dursleys' fear of wizards on Privet Drive was still her best chance. They may be able to explain away the barred window as keeping their mad little niece under control, but get a few oddballs in black robes outside, and rumors of a cult would spread like wildfire. Hallie might be powerless in this instance, but the fans of the Boy-Who-Lived were rabid beasts (as she well knew). She was seriously tempted to try a little more magic if it would summon the Ministry, but Hallie was wary enough of getting expelled.

"QUIET DOWN IN THERE, GIRL!" her uncle roared, thumping the door that Hallie's head still rested on.

So much for that; Vernon was just too bloody stupid to back down.

The footsteps continued, and Hallie heard quick, light breathing behind the door. Before it occurred to her to what would happen, Hallie found her meager lunch shoved through the cat flap and onto her legs. The plastic tray tipped to the floor, and cold, chunky chicken soup began soaking into her jeans.

Any further cursing on Hallie's part went ignored by her relatives. They were apparently unworried; their hatred of Hallie far overrode common sense. In spite of that, Vernon found himself clutching his favorite club under the covers that night, while Petunia tossed and turned, throwing furtive glances at the owl-free sky. Dudley, on the other hand, slept rather soundly until his own personal bogeyman crawled out of the closet, yowling as it chased the mouse sniffing candy wrappers.

Sable fought his own battles, while Hallie checked the loose floorboard once again and plotted.

As far as she was concerned, any rescue attempts were taking far too long, anyway. Gryffindors were not known for their patience.

The downstairs clock chimed the hour (half past two in the morning), and all was silent in the Dursley residence—Well, as silent as one could get if you didn't snore like a lawnmower. Bed springs creaked, her uncle grunted, and a car horn honked in the distance. All else was quiet.

Perfect.

Hallie grunted and wiggled the screwdriver. Just a little more and she would...

Success!

The last metal pin popped out, and the door, unsupported by its hinges, wobbled and swung right out. Hallie gasped and struggled to hold the heavy wooden slab, carefully letting it slide to the floor, leaving only a soft creak to disturb the silent house. The door still remained connected by the useless padlocks outside, but the only barrier between Hallie and freedom was gone.

Sable crept forward, looking smug in a way that no animal should. Hallie had to give him credit, though. Her familiar had smuggled the screwdriver right from under Vernon's nose that morning, and then passed it through the cat flap once her relatives were asleep.

Hallie withheld a triumphant snicker for time being. She bet they never expected her to ignore the seven padlocks and simply remove the door!

'Take that, Vernon! I didn't even need magic for that—just one of your precious tools! Grunnings' finest indeed!'

Hallie grabbed the ratty pillowcase at her feet, stuffed with her most prized possessions: her cloak, photo album, amulet, and wand. None of the items had been of any use in her escape, but at least Hallie didn't need to worry about another warning from the ministry.

Whispering softly for Sable to follow, the two magical beings departed, leaving only a broken door and a smattering of paint chips as any trace of their presence.

Juggling her belongings, Hallie tiptoed through the dark hallway and down the stairs. A few minutes' work with two bent paperclips, and the single lock on the cupboard clicked open. It was almost too easy, and Hallie only regretted that she would miss her family's reactions in the morning. Vernon would have an aneurism when he found the door. Hallie would have gladly left gifts for both Petunia and Dudley, as well, if she only had the time. Unfortunately, dragging her trunk from the cupboard was neither easy nor quiet. Hallie's throat tightened in dread at the thought of being discovered.

She placed the trunk flat on the carpet, and then balanced Hedwig's cage on top, keeping her pillowcase thrown over one shoulder. Sable obliged her by crawling into the cage and settling down. Grabbing the handle of her trunk, Hallie started dragging it slowly towards the front door. Her eyes glanced back every now and then to make sure she was going straight, but then she looked back at the cage and sighed. Hedwig still hadn't returned...

Hallie fumbled with the locks on the front door and finally stepped out onto the porch. She carefully pulled the door shut behind her. With the Muggle hellhole finally at her back, Hallie let out a breath of relief. The tension of an entire summer lifted from her shoulders.

No more second bedroom.

No more cooking and cleaning.

No more lousy meals.

No more bloody Dursleys.

She was free.

...So, now what?

A noisy rumble interrupted Hallie before she could dig her herself too deep into despair. For a moment, she thought it was plane somewhere above, but then she realized that the shadow passing overhead wasn't all that large... just very close.

Hallie was about to be hit by a car—a flying car. Somehow, it didn't surprise her.

The only option in those short, life-flashing-before-her-eyes seconds seemed to be huddling into a tiny ball behind her trunk and ducking her head, shutting her eyes, and praying to Merlin. It worked well enough as the car landed roughly in the front lawn, bouncing and skidding to a halt just meters before her nose. Hallie glances up anxiously, eyes immediately finding the disaster area that was once the Dursleys' prize-winning lawn, as well as the mud splatters dripping all down the company car.

Bugger, Hallie was going to regret missing the horror which that evoked.

“Hallie, is that you?”

Her head snapped up in shock at the very familiar voice.

“Ron?!” she asked incredulously.

It was indeed her best friend, the redhead whose face she had not seen in over a month. Ron was hanging out of the driver's side window, waving eagerly as he scrambled to open the door, and finally spilling out onto the ground in his haste.

“Hallie, you're okay!” He sounded almost accusing as he said it.

“Er, yeah...” Hallie thought back to the unhinged door upstairs, and tried not to glance at the bars quite visible on her window. “So, what are you doing here?” she finally asked.

Ron threw up his arms in a huff. “Rescuing you, of course! We got worried when you didn't answer any of my letters. I thought those

bloody Muggles had killed you, or something!” He glared at the ground, and Hallie noticed his ears turning slightly red.

“Ah, well, as you can see, I’m still alive!” Hallie grinned, and tried not to laugh. She felt an unfamiliar warmth in her stomach. Her friends had definitely not forgotten her. “About the letters—Well, it’s a long story about a crazy house-elf, and my even loonier relatives... I really am glad you show up, though! It certainly took you long enough!”

Ron shrugged and reached out to help Hallie with her trunk. “The twins were planning to bust you out themselves, but they blew up their bedroom again, so Mum was keeping an extra eye on them. Besides, I figured you wouldn’t want them to find out you’re really a girl—Do you have any idea what they would have done with that sort of blackmail?” He shuddered, from personal experience, no doubt.

They finally reached the car, although Hallie’s trunk was now rather dirty from being dragged through the deeply-gouged lawn. Hallie started to haul it into the back seat as Ron explained ‘borrowing’ his dad’s car, when she noticed someone rather startling in the front passenger seat.

“Hermione?!” Hallie gasped, recognizing the bushy-haired girl immediately. How in the world had Ron convinced her to fly across England in the middle of the night?

“Hermione, it’s great to see you!” she smiled widely. “I can’t believe you’re here! Hermione Granger, breaking all the rules—It seems we’ve finally been a good influence on you, eh?”

Surprisingly, Hermione didn’t try to refute the notion, instead remaining oddly stiff in her seat. Her bushy hair seemed even bit more frazzled than usual, and—was her face a little green? Hallie grabbed her shoulder and shook it slightly.

“Er, Hermione, you in there? Ron, what’s wrong with her?”

Ron scratched his nose sheepishly, and tried not to look at his catatonic friend. “Er—the car ride was a little rough on Hermione...”

The sickened Muggleborn finally showed signs of life as she twisted her head sharply to glare daggers at Ron. Her mouth opened and closed in soundless fury, but Hermione kept one hand hovering near her face to suppress her nausea.

“A little rough, Ronald?!” she choked out. Thankfully, her shriek was muffled enough not to attract attention. Hallie shot a nervous glance back at the house, both to check on her relatives and to avoid Hermione’s gaze as her wild, bloodshot eyes turned on Hallie. “Oh, you’d better have been in mortal peril, Hallie, do you hear me? Never in my life have I done anything so stupid—I can’t believe I let you talk me into this, Ronald—And I thought you had some idea how to drive this thing! My seventy-year-old grandmother frightens me less behind the wheel—and she’s half blind! Do you have any idea how much trouble we could have been in? Property damage aside, the number of laws we’ve broken... We were nearly killed—and worse, we could have been—”

“Expelled,” Hallie and Ron finished predictably. Hallie rolled her eyes, knowing that Hermione was fine if she could rant that much without puking.

Ron tried to reign in his temper as he got in behind the wheel. “I get it already, Hermione!”

“Well, then, I’d better make sure you keep it, Ronald—”

“I don’t know why you’re so mad—we didn’t even hit that bloody pigeon—”

“What about the billboard then—”

“The Muggles will have it fixed in no time—Who cares about some stupid guy in a suit, anyway? That James Bond looked like a right prat—”

As the argument degenerated into over who was best suited to drive back—not that any of them actually had a license, but Hermione, at least, new how to work the pedals—Hallie couldn’t help but lean back into her seat with a happy sigh, and laugh a little at her friends. As

long as they made it back in one piece, then her summer was already looking up.

Severus Snape crossed his legs irritably, and took another sip of disgustingly sweet tea. He would never understand the point of buying foreign tea that tasted like billiwig wings steeped in sugar when a simple cup of Earl Grey would do any day. Nevertheless, he swallowed as quickly as he could without scalding himself, and nodded politely to his host.

“Do forgive me if it isn’t to your liking, Severus, but I wasn’t expecting you to drop by this morning.” Narcissa Malfoy raised a delicately sculpted eyebrow as she settled back after filling his cup. At her side, Mrs. Parkinson simpered, fluttering her eyelashes ridiculously and puckering her pug-like face. It was only with the greatest of control that Severus withheld his sneer.

“Yes, well, I was hoping to speak with Lucius,” he finally said.

Actually, Severus would like nothing better than to go back to his lab and work on that burn paste Pomfrey was so insistent on storing. In his opinion, any dunderhead that was burned in his class deserved to suffer the pain of their idiocy. Unfortunately, Dumbledore didn’t agree with his stern teaching methods; it was also Dumbledore who forced him out of the pleasantly cool dungeons at such an ungodly hour to run errands. As if playing politics with Lucius Malfoy wasn’t tiresome enough during peace times, Severus was forced to play minder to the bane of his existence, Harry James Potter. Simply because a few of the old man’s trinkets decided to go off last night (probably detecting one of that squib’s damn kneazles again), Severus was being sent after the Malfoys to pay a visit to Petunia Dursley. His itinerary that day could not get much worse.

At least his godson was suffering alongside him.

Severus’s eyes glittered with hidden amusement as he watched Draco on the settee across the room. The soon-to-be-second-year was trying not to spill his tea while fending off young Pansy Parkinson’s overzealous affections. Frankly, no child could have appeared as lecherous as that chit as she attempted, once again, to

sneak one of her clawing hands under his godson's shirt. Draco sent him a look across the room, half pleading and half glaring for the lack of assistance.

Severus smirked and put down his unfinished tea. Uncrossing his legs, he turned to Narcissa, completely ignoring the boy, and asked, "Is Lucius not here?"

"I'm afraid not, Severus." Her voice was coolly distant, but Narcissa seemed genuinely unhappy with the answer. "He left on some business to have a rare item appraised by Mr. Borgin."

Severus wondered about that. Anyone with half a brain knew that Lucius had been selling off his property in Knockturn Alley, yet somehow eluding the Aurors every time they tried to catch him. The aristocrat was cunning and unpredictable in a way that made him far more dangerous than the average pureblood sycophant. Lucius looked out only for himself and his money, even when it came to the Dark Lord. It kept him alive and out of prison during the first war, while the most dedicated Death Eaters were currently rotting in Azkaban under twenty-four-hour guard. That wasn't to say that Lucius wasn't loyal to the Dark Lord; he was a pureblood fanatic if there ever was one, and Lord Voldemort represented everything that Lucius viewed as worthy in the Wizarding World. He was one wizard to be watched carefully, which was the only reason that Severus continued their farce of a friendship; it certainly wasn't for the witty conversation.

"Well, then I suppose I'll try to speak with him another time," Severus finally said, drawing himself back toward the present. "Thank you for your hospitality, Narcissa, but I must be going—I have quite a few potions to finish before the school year begins." He nodded toward the other woman, "Madam. Draco, Miss Parkinson, I will see you both at the Welcoming Feast."

Severus stood, and an elf appeared to lead him out.

"Good-bye, Uncle Severus, thank you for visiting," Draco called in a tight voice. "I hope you'll come again—soon." The last word was just on the edge of a growl, and Narcissa sent her son a sharp look of reprimand. The Parkinsons, of course, noticed none of this. Those

two were prime examples of the downside to pureblood inbreeding; magic could only fix so much.

Leaving in a billow of black robes, Severus hid a grimace. While watching his arrogant godson sulk was always interesting to watch, he was not looking forward to his next stop. Curse Albus Dumbledore for sending him—Why not Minerva, or that oaf, Hagrid? He was sure the old codger enjoyed making others miserable. In Albus's own words, however, it was a splendid chance for a reunion. Right, because Severus would love nothing more than to see Petunia Evans again, that bitter little bitch with the equine features. Merlin, give him patience, or she would be hexed in five minutes flat.

After exiting Malfoy Manor, Severus sent the house-elf away and continued on his own to the apparition point. With a flick of his wand and a twist of his boots, Severus vanished from the immaculate Malfoy gardens, complete with live white peacocks, and reappeared beneath the shade of a broad oak tree on the side of Number 4 Privet Drive, staring at an ugly plastic lawn gnome. Grunting in displeasure, Severus turned on his heel and headed for the front door, never glancing up to see the iron bars on the second floor window.

As he crossed the front yard, Severus was forced to pick his way through two muddy trenches that cut through the grass and stopped just short of the front steps. The disastrous marks sparked something in his memory, but Severus didn't care for the cause. Suffice to say, Petunia had really let herself go if such a mess didn't infringe upon her obsessive compulsive cleaning habits.

Reaching the door, he rapped it three times.

No one answered. Severus thought, and with no small amount of relief, that perhaps the Dursleys weren't home. He glanced toward the driveway to check for a car and was taken aback. There wasn't a car, so much as a mound of mud-covered metal.

Severus checked the number on the house again. Yes, it was the right house, but something rather odd was going on...

He knocked again.

Severus was growing irritated by the lack of response, especially when he spotted the kitchen curtains twitching suspiciously. He glared at the vague form behind them and hit the door more forcefully. To his satisfaction, a set of footsteps approached, and he heard the locks undone. The doorknob slowly turned, and the wooden slab creaked inward...

A sour, pinched face appeared in the crack behind the door, and Petunia Evans—now Dursley—straightened up from her cautious crouch immediately as she recognized Severus Snape in all his freakish glory.

“You!” she spat, eyes narrowed with loathing.

Petunia had changed little in the years since they had last seen each other. She was still tall and bony, with stringy blonde hair and watery blue eyes. A white apron was tied tightly around her narrow hips, and Petunia carried a soapy frying pan in one gloved hand, which twitched ever so slightly, as though she wished to swing it at her old friend’s face.

“Yes, me,” Severus said with a humorless grin. His fingers tingled for the touch of his wand, but he forced the urge to curse her back.

The door slammed in his face.

Severus was seated on another couch, this one of cheap polyester, and bracing himself for another cup of awful tea. After some effort on his part, and a few cryptic words from Dumbledore that even he hadn’t understood, Petunia was forced to let Severus inside. She then left him with her brutish husband and scurried into the kitchen, her heels clicking smartly.

Staring at the overweight Muggle before him in a way that clearly made the man uncomfortable, Severus planned his next move. He only needed proof that Potter was alive and in residence, and then he would gladly go back to ignoring the pompous brat until September. The stupid boy was probably lazing about in his bedroom... Wouldn’t he get a shock to see his favorite professor downstairs? Severus felt

his lips twist cruelly at the thought, and the Muggle—Vernon—squeaked unbecomingly, his puce complexion paling to a pinkish grey.

The clinking of china set down with more force than necessary heralded Petunia's return. Vernon seemed a touch less anxious with his wife in the room; he obviously had no idea what a wizard was truly capable of. Petunia was not about to stop Severus, old acquaintance or not. The only reason he didn't simply read their minds and Oblivate them was that Dumbledore wanted him to handle the Muggles delicately for Potter's sake.

Severus took his cup—noticeably chipped—from Petunia with a brief smirk. Vernon grasped his with shaking hands, and poured something from a bottle into the tea—brandy, no doubt. Severus lifted his drink to his mouth, but stopped to stir it, watching the tea leaves dance to the bottom of the porcelain. From the corner of his eye, he caught Petunia's unnatural attention on his cup, and placed it back on the table with a disdainful sniff.

"Thank you, Petunia, but why don't you take this back and try again?" He cut her off before her thinning lips could spill her indignation. "And I could do without the rat poison this time."

Petunia froze, and her husband choked on his brandy. Vernon darted a nervous glance at his wife, trying to exchange silent communication. Petunia ignored him with the air of spoiled brat, thwarted, but not guilty in the least. She snatched the tea with a huff, and stalked back into the kitchen.

Vernon was once again alone and the victim of Severus's ire. Even without consciously utilizing his Legilimency, he could hear the man cursing both his wife and Potter in his head; fitting, that the boy would take his share of the blame once Severus left. Determined to get this over with, Severus straightened to his full height and glared down at Vernon.

In his most authoritative voice, he barked, "Enough of this, Dursley, I'm here to see the boy."

No other words could have made such an impact on Vernon. The man went impossibly still at that; not even his three chins quivered. Severus raised a speculative eyebrow, and was prepared to use Legilimency to get his answers, when the man acted in a way he could never have expected.

Vernon leapt out of his chair, causing the teacup to fall to the floor and shatter. Eyes wild, Vernon turned his head and bellowed up the stairs, "DUDLEY, RUN FOR IT!"

Then, before Severus could even get the first syllable of a stunning curse out, he found himself tackled to the floor by three-hundred pounds of raging Muggle.

"YOU STAY AWAY FROM MY BOY, FREAK! I WON'T STAND FOR THIS RUBBISH! PETUNIA, CALL THE POLICE!"

As he fended Vernon off with one hand and aimed his wand with the other, Severus made a mental note to deduct a few thousand points from Gryffindor for this.

Damn Dumbledore for sending him on this fool's mission...

Damn Vernon Dursley for loosing his bloody mind...

And damn Petunia for sneaking up on him with that frying pan!

Levicorpus yanked Vernon into the air, screaming and cursing, and still trying to wrap his meaty fingers around Severus's throat. Accio pulled the soapy frying pan from Petunia's grasp, and a quick Petrificus Totalus saved him the aerosol can aimed at his eyes.

'But most of all,' Severus thought as he stood over the petrified Dursleys, a thunderous expression on his sallow face, 'damn that Harry Potter!'

Twenty minutes later, Severus Snape left the Dursleys' home with more questions than answers. After listening to their useless threats and Vernon's declaration that he had no nephew, Severus was of the mind to write the entire family off as mad; the only other option was

just too fantastical! On the other hand, this was Potter... The boy—or should he say girl—would do anything for a little attention. Would the Boy-Who-Lived really go that far, though? To disguise her gender and fool the entire student body— Severus halted his footsteps as a violent reminder of the Marauders flashed through his mind. He didn't know what James's hell spawn could be thinking, but she wouldn't get away with it for long. He would look into the matter once school began, and Potter would rue the day she was born if he found even a scrap of evidence. Of one thing was Severus certain: the entire situation had that old man's manipulations written all over it!

REVIEW!

You liked it? C'mon, you know you liked it! Throw up a round of applause, my desperate little fans, I've actually posted a new chapter! Consider it a Christmas present.

Next:Chapter 7